THE RAINBOW EDITION

ASIAN Geographic

NO. 167

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{ EDITOR'S NOTE }

GODSGIFT
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Lester V. Ledesma

Over the last several issues, we've been celebrating the incredible colours of Asia – and with good reason. Asia is nothing if not colourful, in every sense of the word: lively, fascinating, and diverse. Its ethnic costumes, its cuisines, its festivals, its wildlife – Asia is defined by its glorious, chaotic, inspiring blend of hues.

Our unique colour-themed special editions – Pink (No. 160), Green (No. 162), Blue (No. 163), Yellow (No. 164), Red (No. 165), and Silver (No. 166) – have explored so much of what makes Asia the truly vibrant continent that it is. What else could we do but cap it all with the issue you now have in your hands? Welcome to the very special *Rainbow Edition of ASIAN Geographic*.

A sizeable portion of Asia – 16 countries, home to well over two billion people – experiences tropical climates, and nowhere is it more colourful than below the waterline. In "Rainbow Reefs" (page 24), regular contributors and underwater photographers Anita Verde and Peter Marshall shine a light (quite literally) on these stunning coral blooms, from Indonesia, the Philippines and the Solomon Islands to Fiji, Palau and Australia.

Meanwhile, on the surface, Asia's cities hum with the constant drone of traffic, but in the Philippines, what assaults the senses is the joyous cacophony from the ubiquitous – and unapologetically flamboyant – jeepneys. Manila-bred writer and photographer Lester V. Ledesma celebrates these uniquely Pinoy symbols in "Kings of the Road" (page 68), and wonders what the future holds for these not-so-humble national symbols.

And if there's one religion in Asia to which the word "colourful" surely applies, it's Hinduism, so how could we not also marvel at the festival that has been called the "largest gathering of humanity on Earth"? India's Kumbh Mela is an extraordinary spectacle that reached its zenith in 2025 when more than 660 million people took a dip in the holy rivers at Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh. As we discover in "Maha Kumbh Mela" (page 50), staging a festival of that magnitude is an extraordinary feat – and not without its challenges.

Ian Bongso-Seldrup

An Exciting Editorial Journey with *ASIAN Geographic* Magazine in 2025!

ASIAN Geographic
COLLECTOR'S EDITION
Ai

ASIA FUTURE TECH & TRAVEL

ASIAN Geographic
No. 168 Issue 1/2025

Asia is poised to lead the future of tech, driven by rapid innovation and government investment in emerging fields like artificial intelligence, robotics, 5G connectivity, and drone technology. Countries like China, Japan, South Korea and Singapore are at the forefront, pioneering advancements in smart cities, autonomous vehicles, and renewable energy. With Asia's growing tech talent and thriving startup ecosystems, the region is becoming a global hub for innovation. This issue explores all the latest tech emerging from the region as well as challenges such as data privacy, cybersecurity, and balancing rapid growth with environmental sustainability.

ASIAN Geographic
COLLECTOR'S EDITION
food & travel

ASIA FOOD & TRAVEL

ASIAN Geographic
No. 170 Issue 3/2025

Because today's travellers are searching for a cultural experience, which is inextricably tied to food, this sector of the travel industry is steadily gaining momentum. Naturally, Asia is an easy choice. In addition to the warm, Asian hospitality, top destinations like Thailand, Indonesia, India and Japan have always been known for their food, and travellers seek out the best local fare to post on social media, and share the stories behind what they are eating. That is perhaps one of the best ways to discover the world, one dish at a time.

ASIA WELLNESS & TRAVEL

ASIAN Geographic PASSPORT
No. 169 Issue 2/2025

Besides the typical vacation to explore and discover new places and cultures, there is a growing demand for personalised wellness retreats that cater to individual needs and preferences. Especially in Asia, hotels and resorts are responding to this demand by offering specialised wellness programs and amenities, including dedicated spa facilities, wellness consultations, healthy dining options, and fitness centres. Wellness trips now represent 6.5 percent of all tourism travel, profoundly changing behaviour, choices and spending decisions. Asian traditions and healing philosophies – from yoga, Ayurveda to traditional Chinese medicine's concept of restoring balance and energy – have deeply influenced almost every aspect of the wellness industry for several decades. This issue will cover it all, explaining the various methodologies and philosophies behind what restores an ailing body and mind.

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ASIA ISLAND TRAVEL & TOURISM

ASIAN Geographic PASSPORT
No. 171 Issue 4/2025

The idea of baking on white-sand beaches, strolling amongst palm trees swaying in a warm breeze is the quintessential image of a perfect, tropical island getaway for many people. On islands where tourism is substantial, there has been significant influence on economic relationships, social change is considerable and cultures and environments have been transformed. This issue will examine both sides of the coin – how people make their choices on the type of island vacation, and their inevitable impact on the local communities and economies.

www.asiangeo.com

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Behind the Mask

Asia has a rich tradition of using colourful masks in its theatre, rituals and festivals. From China to Japan, Bhutan to Papua New Guinea, these spiritual and folkloric symbols characterise the rich identities and storytelling customs of the region's diverse cultures

CHENGDU, CHINA

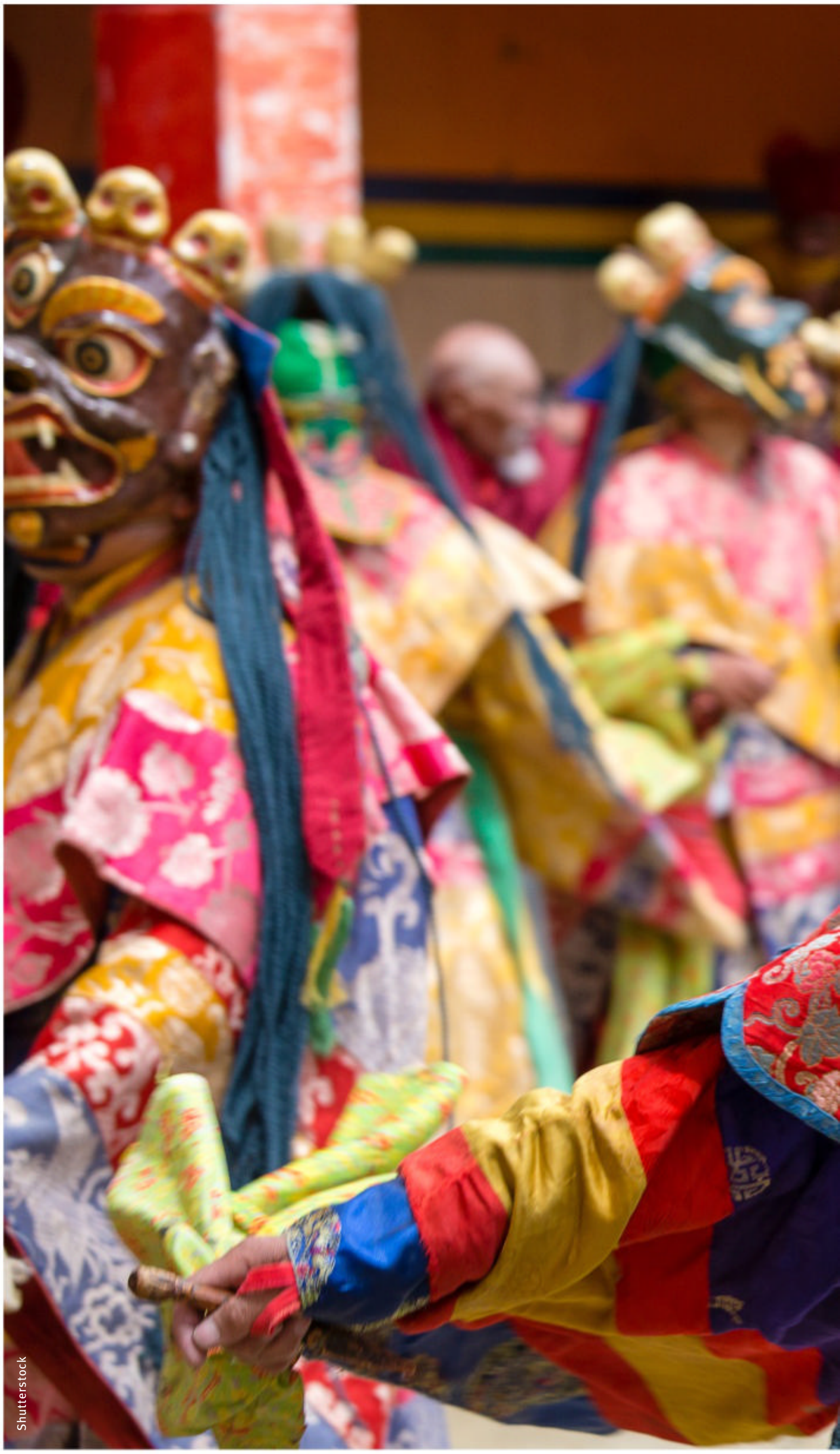
A performer enthrals audiences with traditional face-changing art, or *bian lian*, at the Chunxifang Chunxilu covered street. The ancient Chinese dramatic art is part of the more general Sichuan opera, originating in Sichuan province around 1700. Performers wear vividly coloured masks, typically depicting characters from the opera, which they change from one face to another with a deft swipe of a fan or brisk wave of the hand.

DID YOU KNOW?

There are five distinct opera styles, each with a different history. The most distinctive and representative form of Sichuan opera is Gaoqiang (高/高), which is characterised by its free line and free singing style. The others are Kunqiang (崑/昆), Huqin (鬍/胡), Tanxi (彈/弹), and Dengdiao (燈/灯).

LADAKH, INDIA

Buddhist lamas wearing vibrant masks perform the traditional Cham dance, the main highlight of the Yuru Kabgyat festival, which is celebrated in Ladakh's famous Lamayuru Monastery. Held in June/July, the two-day festival is attended by a large number of Buddhist devotees not only from India but also from China, Japan, Korea, and Bhutan. The festival is dedicated to Yama, the Hindu god of death and justice, and Padmasambhava, the second Buddha and the mythological protector of animals.



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DID YOU KNOW?

The masked Cham dance has deep spiritual significance. It is believed to please the deities and protect the community from natural calamities and evil spirits.

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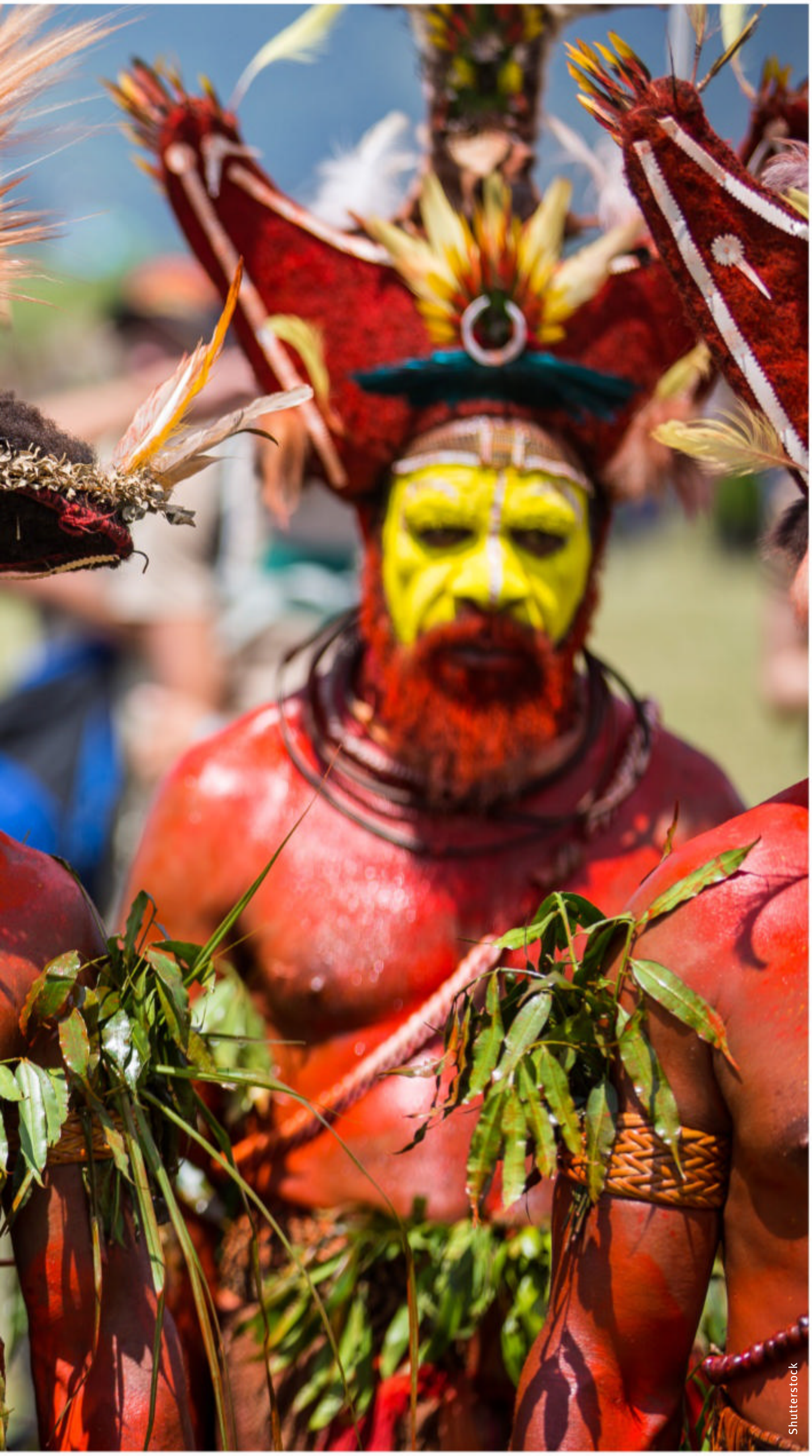

MOUNT HAGEN, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Colourfully adorned tribesmen perform at the Mount Hagen Cultural Show, an annual spectacle showcasing the diverse traditional practices, costumes, and performances of the various ethnic groups across the highlands of Papua New Guinea. Participants come together to display their flamboyant attire, which is commonly embellished with body paint, shells, and feathers.

DID YOU KNOW?

Typically taking place in August, the Mt. Hagen Festival attracts thousands of visitors from both local communities and overseas. An invitation to appreciate the rich cultural tapestry of Papua New Guinea, the festival is also an opportunity to sample the local cuisine and pick up some traditional handcrafted goods.

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LOEI, THAILAND

Townspeople wearing elaborate multicoloured ghost masks make merry during the Phi Ta Khon Festival, better known as Thailand's Ghost Festival. The three-day festival, part of the Buddhist merit-making festival of Bun Pawet, involves fun-filled games, traditional music, and noisy street processions, as performers try to awaken the spirits of the dead.

DID YOU KNOW?

The majority of costumes come with a gigantic, and exquisitely crafted, phallus. Looking more like a sword or a cannon in many cases, these huge phalluses are meant to be harmless fun, designed to set a festive mood – along with bucketloads of alcohol!

BACOLOD, PHILIPPINES

Participants show off their sequin-adorned, many-hued costumes during the pulsating street dances at the centre of the eye-popping Masskara Festival. The ornately decorated masks are a showcase of the artistry of local craftsmen, while the festivities encapsulate Bacolod's rich heritage and traditions. The event culminates in a grand finale of fireworks and lights called the Electric Masskara, a night parade that features choreographed dancers wearing costumes and masks illuminated with LED lights.

DID YOU KNOW?

The word "Masskara" is a portmanteau of *mass* (a multitude) and the Spanish word *cara* (face), thus meaning "a multitude of faces". It is also a pun on *maskara*, Filipino for "mask", a prominent feature of the festival. The masks are always adorned with smiling faces, giving rise to Bacolod's nickname, the "City of Smiles".

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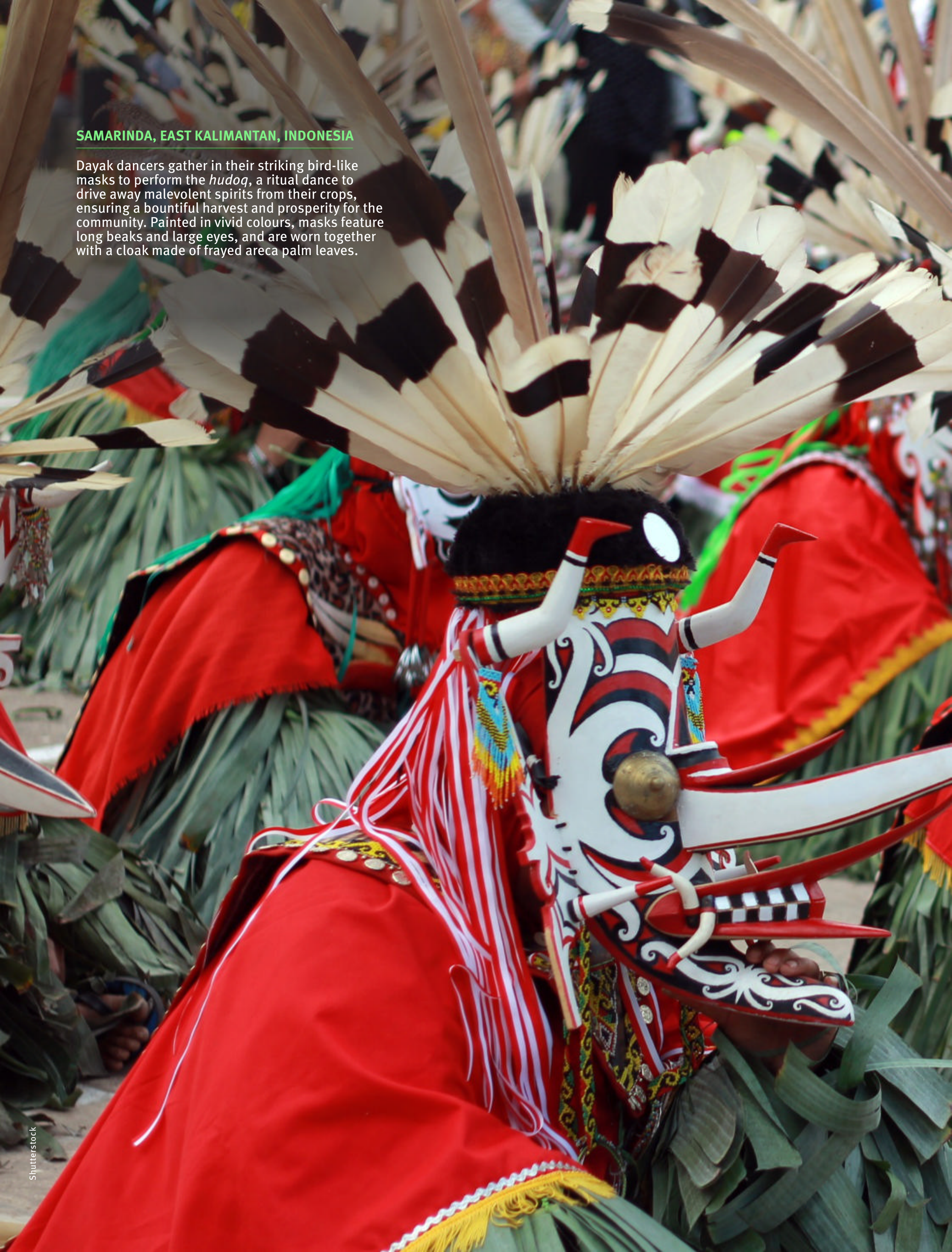
SHIMANE, JAPAN

An Iwami Kagura performer wears a mask depicting the jealous female demon Hannya. A form of dance-theatre literally meaning "entertaining the gods", *kagura* tells stories mostly based on tales from the *Kojiki*, an ancient Japanese collection of myths, legends and semi-historical accounts typically involving battles between gods and demons. In Shimane Prefecture, in western Japan, Iwami Kagura is a local style of *kagura* that is known for its colourful costumes, fast pace and simple storylines.

DID YOU KNOW?

Iwami Kagura masks are made by pasting tiny pieces of ripped *washi* paper onto a clay mould, layer upon layer. After the paper has dried and hardened, the mould is removed and decorative finishes are applied. Real silver and gold thread embroidery is used in the accompanying costumes, which can take four people up to four months to create.



SAMARINDA, EAST KALIMANTAN, INDONESIA

Dayak dancers gather in their striking bird-like masks to perform the *hudoq*, a ritual dance to drive away malevolent spirits from their crops, ensuring a bountiful harvest and prosperity for the community. Painted in vivid colours, masks feature long beaks and large eyes, and are worn together with a cloak made of frayed areca palm leaves.

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DID YOU KNOW?

In some versions of the *hudoq*, performers are dressed as fantastical interpretations of crop-destroying pests, and dances culminate in the “pests” being chased away by masked human figures, restoring order and replenishing the land.

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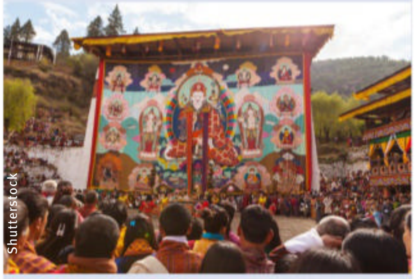
PARO, BHUTAN

A masked monk strikes a pose during the Paro Tshechu at Rinpung Dzong Buddhist monastery. These mesmerising Cham dances are at the heart of the five-day festival, which typically falls during the month of March or April. Hidden behind intricate masks depicting gods and demons, performers enact tales of historic battles and cosmic sagas, breathing life into the vibrant tapestry of Bhutanese folklore and spiritual tradition. ◆ AG

DID YOU KNOW?

The final day of the Paro Tshechu sees the unveiling of the colossal silk Thongdrel, an awe-inspiring religious tapestry that drapes an entire wall of the building. The sacred scroll captivates attendees with its intricate depiction of Guru Rinpoche and other revered deities.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Revealed
Tiny Time Machine

Tucked into a corner of Hong Kong is a compact museum that invites you to uncover the mysteries of our interconnected planet.

Text by **Ian Bongso-Seldrup**, Images by **The Little Museum of the World**

Wander around Siu Sai Wan in the northeastern part of Hong Kong Island and you'll be mostly confronted by high-rise apartment blocks and multistorey car parks, plus the occasional school and shopping mall. But nestled in this unassuming residential district is a gem you would least expect: a tiny museum that offers visitors a unique journey through the history of our planet.

Founded by Christian Pilard, a long-time Hong Kong resident and environmental advocate, The Little Museum of the World is crammed with literally thousands of objects, from 3.9-billion-year-old stromatolites (the first record we have of organic life) to fragments of the parachute that dropped the Apollo 11 crew back to Earth; shards of pottery from ancient civilisations to boxing gloves signed by champion boxer Muhammad Ali. Alongside these inspiring artefacts, you'll also discover objects symbolising the very worst excesses of human nature: the chains of slavery, the barbed-wire of the concentration camps, and the record books of Apartheid.

Central to the museum's mission are the themes of peace, humanity, and respect. Pilard envisions the museum as more than just a repository; it's a platform for promoting sustainability, equality, and global understanding. This vision is embodied by Boopy, the museum's orange sparrow mascot, who symbolises the fragility of ecosystems and the importance of conservation. Boopy's adventures – hanging out on the International Space Station, crossing Africa on a tandem bike, diving in a submarine to 2,000 metres off Fiji – serve to inspire visitors, younger ones in particular, about the interconnectedness of life on Earth.

THE MUHAMMAD ALI CENTER
Opens to the World November 2005 Louisville, Kentucky

◂ Museum founder Christian Pilard

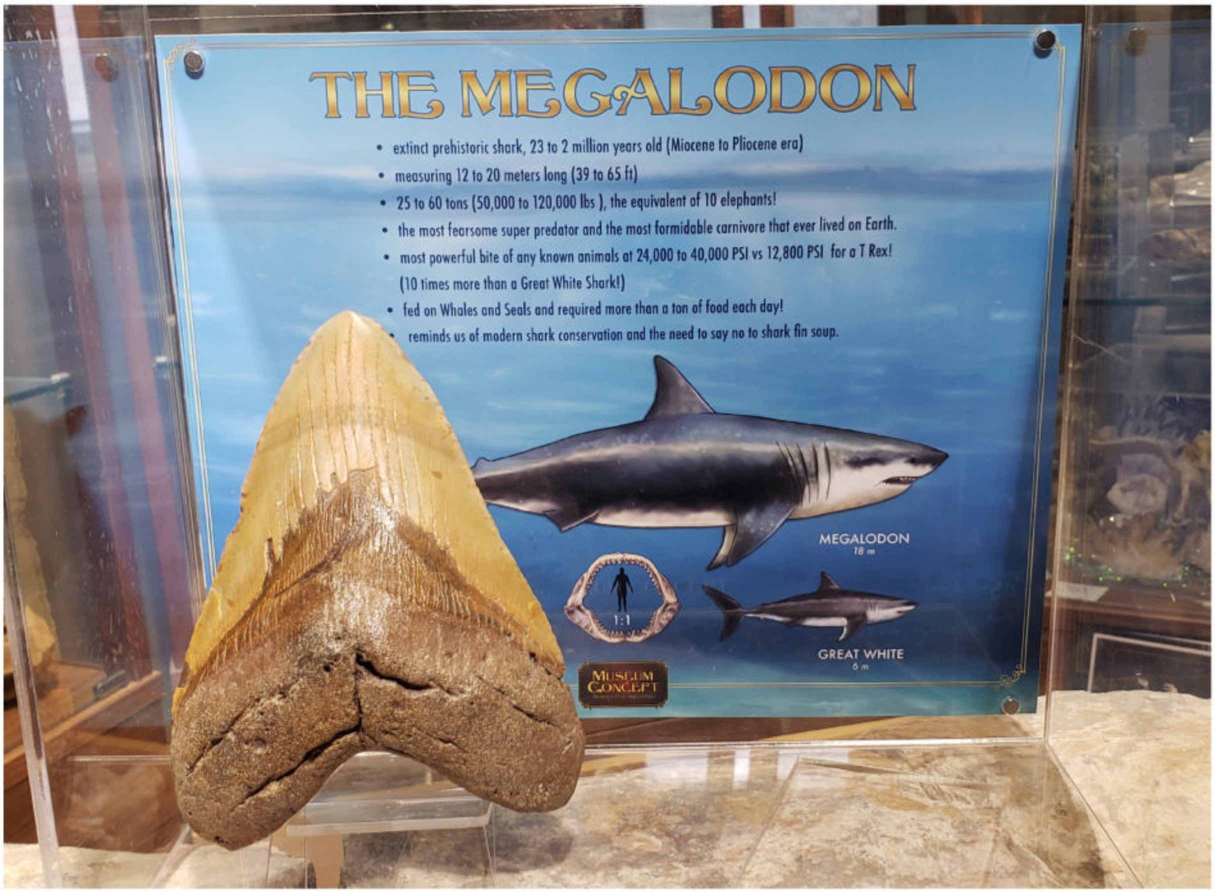
▴ A vintage diving helmet

▾ A (defused) World War II mine

▴ Boxing gloves signed by Muhammad Ali

▾ Meteorite fragments of various sizes

Commandement Suprême
Expéditionnaires Alliés



THE MEGALODON

- extinct prehistoric shark, 23 to 2 million years old (Miocene to Pliocene era)
- measuring 12 to 20 meters long (39 to 65 ft)
- 25 to 60 tons (50,000 to 120,000 lbs), the equivalent of 10 elephants!
- the most fearsome super predator and the most formidable carnivore that ever lived on Earth.
- most powerful bite of any known animals at 24,000 to 40,000 PSI vs 12,800 PSI for a T Rex! (10 times more than a Great White Shark!)
- fed on Whales and Seals and required more than a ton of food each day!
- reminds us of modern shark conservation and the need to say no to shark fin soup.

MEGALODON
18 m
1:1
GREAT WHITE
6 m
MUSEUM CONCEPT

◂▴ A fossilised tooth of a megalodon

◂ Historical artefacts from Asia

▴ Vintage cameras

Through the sale of "Edu-Art Packs", the museum supports various environmental and social projects worldwide.

For those unable to visit the physical museum, there's the option of booking a captivating virtual tour. An easy way for global audiences to engage with the museum's offerings, this 3D tour – guided by Boopy, of course – allows users to explore 120 meaningful objects, each accompanied by detailed narratives in English and French. The educational initiatives extend beyond the museum's walls. Through the sale of "Edu-Art Packs", the museum supports various environmental and social projects worldwide. For instance, proceeds from the "Adorable Endangered Animals of Cambodia" pack benefits Wildlife Alliance's efforts in the Cardamom Mountains.

Pilard's commitment to social and environmental causes is further demonstrated by his founding of the Eco-Sys Action Foundation (*www.ecosysaction.org*), which helps empower communities in Asia and Africa to establish environmentally sustainable solutions for the protection of threatened species and habitats. Fun and engaging initiatives like the Boopy Football Cup are designed to promote community engagement and encourage environmental awareness.

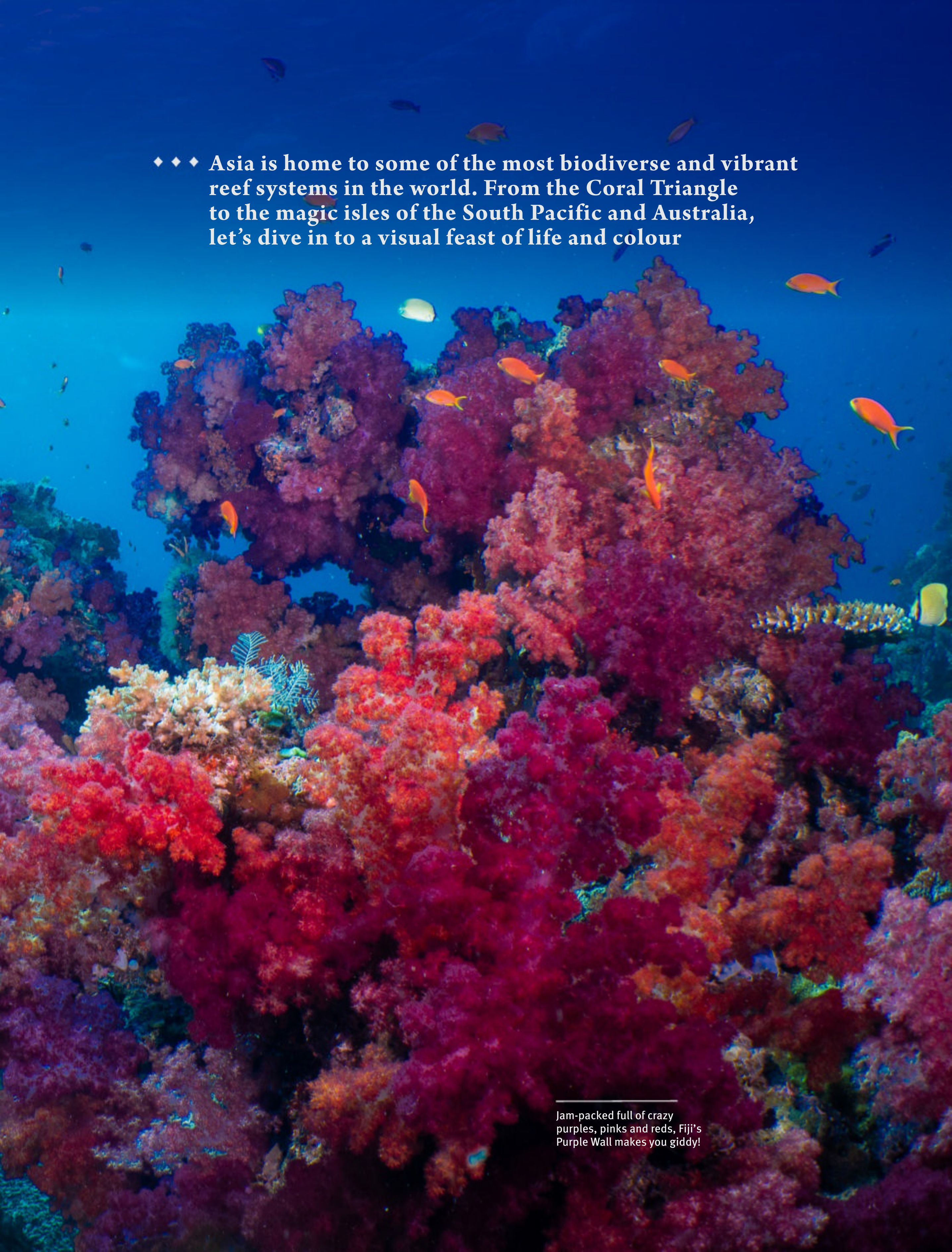
So, the next time you find yourself in Hong Kong, take a little time to make your way to Siu Sai Wan. There's a cute little orange sparrow waiting to greet you and open your mind to the incredible story of our planet and its fascinating inhabitants. And it may just spur you to take action. ◆ AG

Find out more and book the virtual tour: *www.littlemuseumoftheworld.com*

Rainbow Reefs

Text **Anita Verde**
Images **Anita Verde and Peter Marshall**

◆ ◆ ◆ **Asia is home to some of the most biodiverse and vibrant reef systems in the world. From the Coral Triangle to the magic isles of the South Pacific and Australia, let's dive in to a visual feast of life and colour**



Jam-packed full of crazy purples, pinks and reds, Fiji's Purple Wall makes you giddy!

As we surface from a dive in the clear, calm waters of Indonesia, the most strikingly beautiful rainbow reveals itself. Appearing after a brief tropical rain shower, the ocean and sky seem to merge as one, and I can't help but think the rainbow is actually drawing its colour from the wonderous coral reef beneath us.

The Asia region, without doubt, has some of the most vibrant underwater landscapes in the world. These underwater ecosystems burst with life, a sublime example of our planet's artistic brilliance, offering a visual feast to anyone that adventures beneath the surface.

▸
The arresting Technicolor underwater reefscape of Indonesia's Komodo National Park

INDONESIA: BEATING HEART OF THE CORAL TRIANGLE

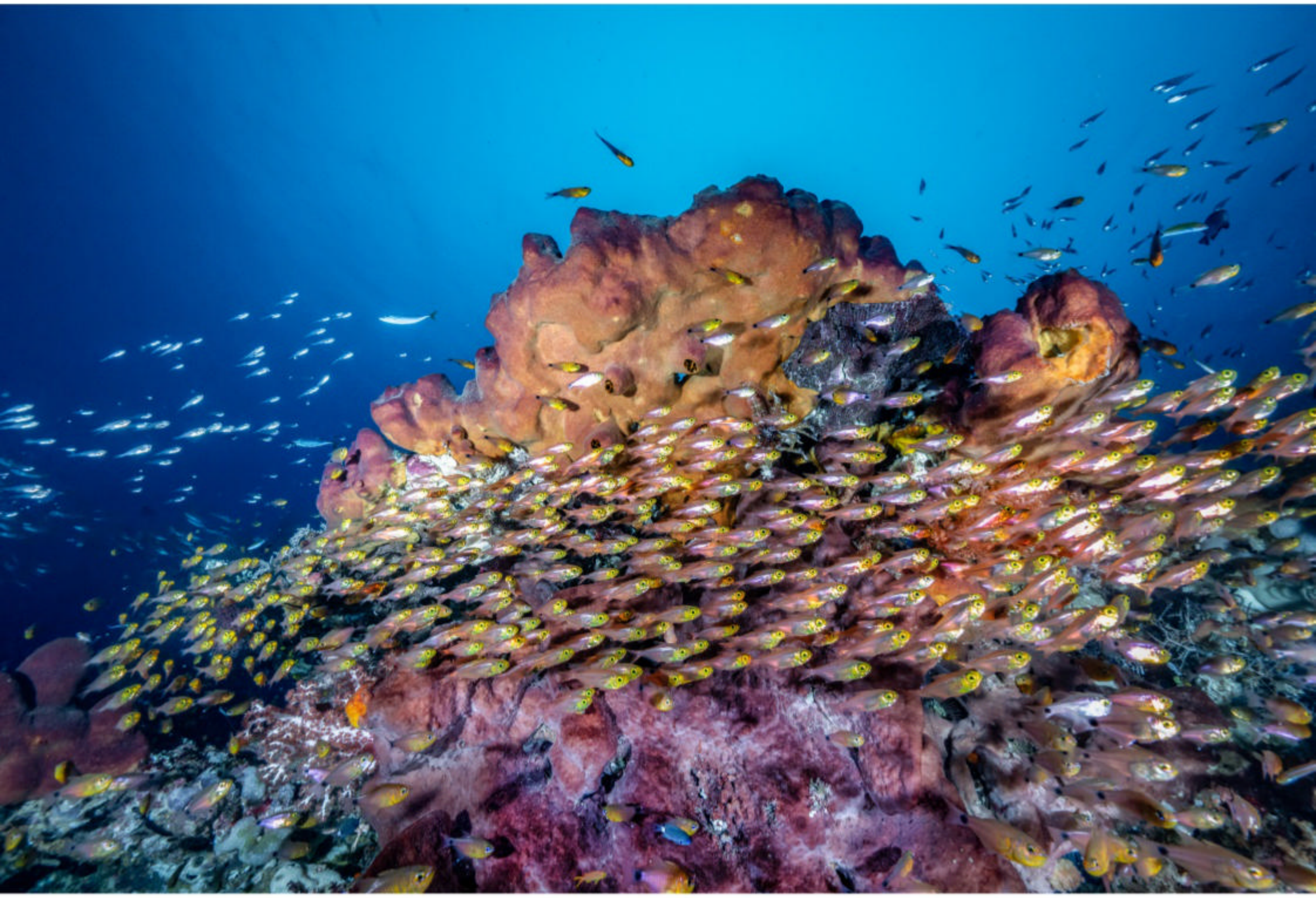
With an estimated 17,000 islands, Indonesia and has three times more of its surface area covered by the sea than it does land; and with it, an extensive undersea landscape of stunning coral gardens to explore. Being at the centre of the Coral Triangle, it also hosts some of the richest marine biodiversity on our planet. Over 574 coral species call this area home.

Being at the centre of the Coral Triangle, Indonesia also hosts some of the richest marine biodiversity on our planet.

▲
Pristine, colourful corals reefs are a staple in Indonesia's Alor marine protected area. Strong and unpredictable currents bring cold upwellings, keeping corals vibrant and healthy

►▲
A moray eel amidst the beauty of the coral reef at Batu Bolong, a popular area for scuba divers that lies within Indonesia's famed Komodo National Park

►
A young green sea turtle rests by stunning hard corals in Indonesia's Komodo National Park. Hard corals, although not always as colourful as soft corals, are incredibly important, as they form the foundation of the coral reef ecosystem, growing into vast reef systems and providing habitat for countless marine species



Known for its nutrient-packed energetic currents and cold upwellings, the coral reefs here have generally remained somewhat more resilient to climate impacts than other parts of the world. Indonesia's coral reefs don't just look pretty, but provide a nursery for thousands of fish species and support a subsistence way of life for local island people. A network of marine protected areas helps manage these reefs in an effort to minimise threats to these precious environments.

◂▴
An explosion of colour! Soft corals, crinoids, and fish life combine in Raja Ampat's Misool Marine Reserve

▴
Small fish school amidst a coral sponge garden in the protected Misool Marine Reserve in the southern reaches of Indonesia's Raja Ampat

◂◂
A diver explores the kaleidoscopic reefs of Raja Ampat in Indonesia

◂
A diver dwarfed by a sea of coal blue by a giant orange gorgonian sea fan in Indonesia's Wakatobi National Park

Indonesia's coral reefs don't just look pretty, but provide a nursery for thousands of fish species and support a subsistence way of life for local island people.

THE WONDER OF THE PHILIPPINES

The Philippines also has a prized position within the Coral Triangle, and diving beneath the surface here does not disappoint. Serving as a sanctuary to almost nine percent of our planet's coral reefs, the Philippine reefs ooze with colour and beauty.

▲▶
With a privileged position at the heart of the Coral Triangle, the Philippines' diverse range of coral species explode to provide a rich habitat for a range of wonderful species

The Philippines also has a prized position within the Coral Triangle, and diving beneath the surface here does not disappoint.

Just a stone's throw from the popular tourist area of Puerto Galera, you'll find one of the Philippines' most arresting underwater landscapes: the coral reefs of the Verde Island Passage. Here, lively and energetic currents that whirl and eddy around the reefscape replenish a myriad of nutrients that are paramount to fuelling the area's profusion of species. The topography of this underwater landscape is arresting, with secret passages, rocky outcrops, and striking sheer vertical walls that provide the substrate for a diverse range of coral species to explode. When the current is asserting itself, you can witness the labyrinth of exquisite *Tubastrea* corals blossoming against a backdrop of dancing anthias and redtoothed triggerfish.

▼
Just a mere two hours from the Philippine capital of Manila, the vibrant and lively reefs of Anilao are picture perfect

►
In the Philippines's Puerto Galera, one colour dominates the substrate: pink!

►▼
The energetic currents of the Verde Island Passage provide the perfect conditions for *Tubastrea* corals to blossom

SOLOMON ISLANDS MAGIC

In the most easterly part of the Coral Triangle and approximately 2,000 kilometres to the northeast of Australia in the southwest Pacific Ocean, you find the Solomon Islands. These mystical isles of sparkling blue and rugged green extend to jaw-dropping coral reefs alongside a graveyard of sunken warriors.

It was here, on the sea's beguiling surface, that one of the most momentous struggles of World War II was waged: the Battle of Guadalcanal. The reefs of the Solomon Islands are therefore indeed incomparable, and few places are blessed with such beauty and mystery. With dramatic walls and pretty coral gardens alongside WWII wrecks, you can't help but be captivated by the magic beneath.

◂▴
Bright pink corals sway in the current at Baby Cakes, off the Nggela Islands in the Solomon Islands

◂
Stunning reef formations at Karumolun Point in the Solomon Islands' Russell Islands

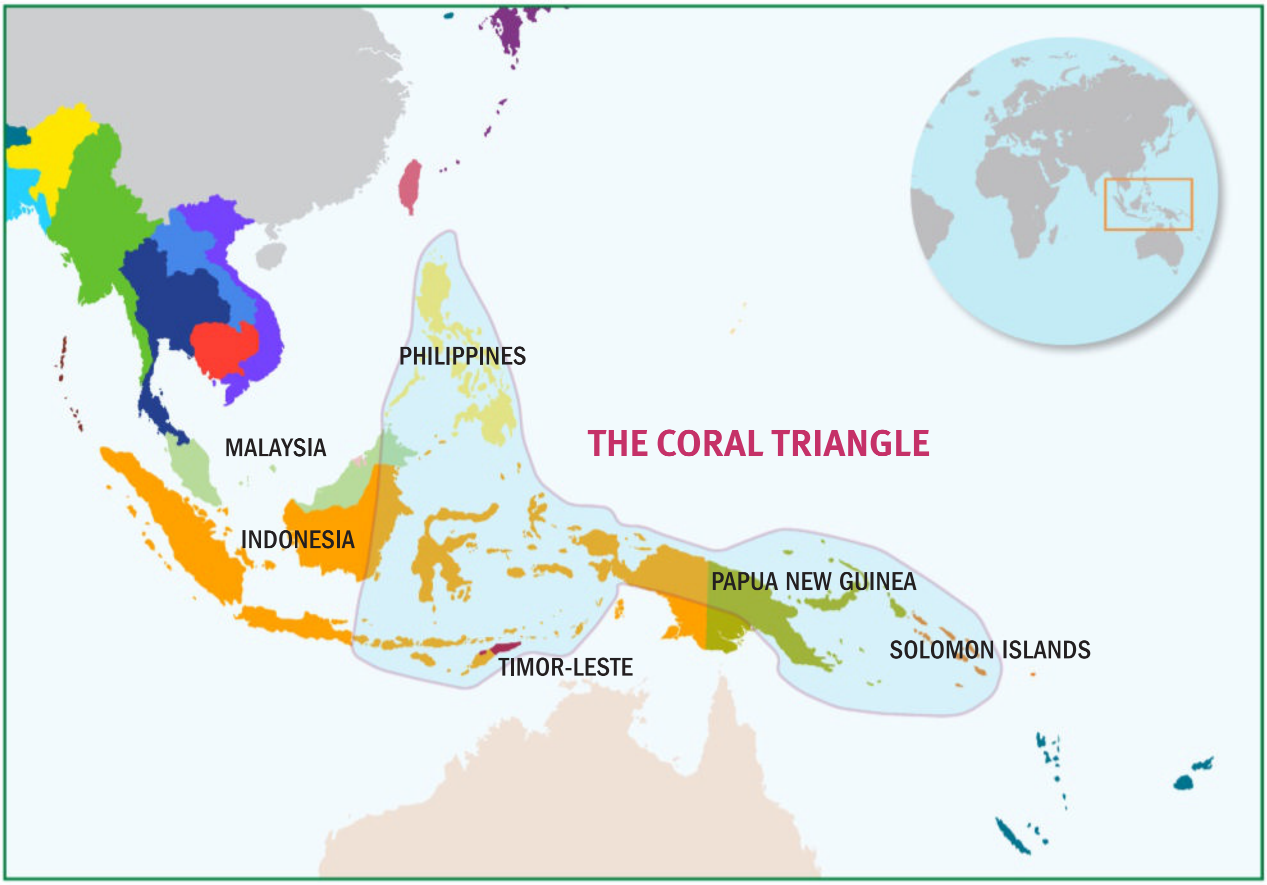
◂◂
Giant vibrant red sea fans dominate the seascape at the Solomon Islands' Kavachi dive site. Incredibly, it is here that you can also feel the rumble of the nearby submarine Kavachi volcano!

Thriving hard corals grow by the mangroves in Raja Ampat, offering a unique environment for marine organisms to transition between both habitats

A masterpiece of Nature, healthy, reef-building cabbage coral thrives at Melissa's Garden, in Indonesia's famed Raja Ampat

What Is the Coral Triangle?

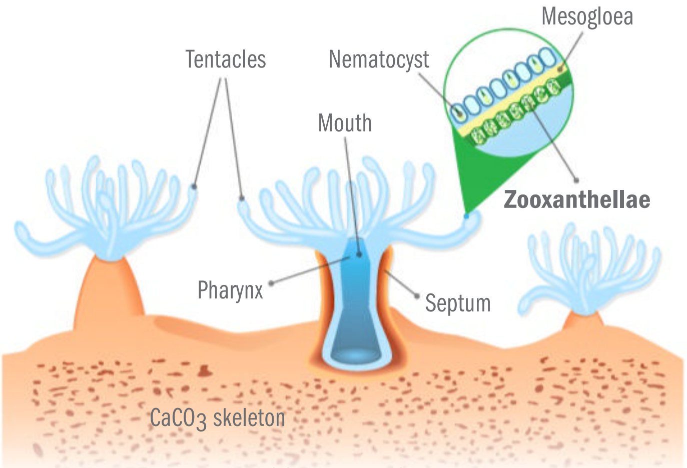
The Coral Triangle is the global epicentre of marine biodiversity. Resembling a rough triangle and encompassing the western Pacific Ocean waters of Indonesia, Malaysia, Timor-Leste, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands, the area boasts nearly 600 different species of reef-building corals, six of the world's seven marine turtle species and more than 2,000 species of reef fish. The areas bordering the Coral Triangle are also exceptionally rich with life, harbouring immense beauty and diversity of species.


PHILIPPINES
MALAYSIA
THE CORAL TRIANGLE
INDONESIA
PAPUA NEW GUINEA
SOLOMON ISLANDS
TIMOR-LESTE

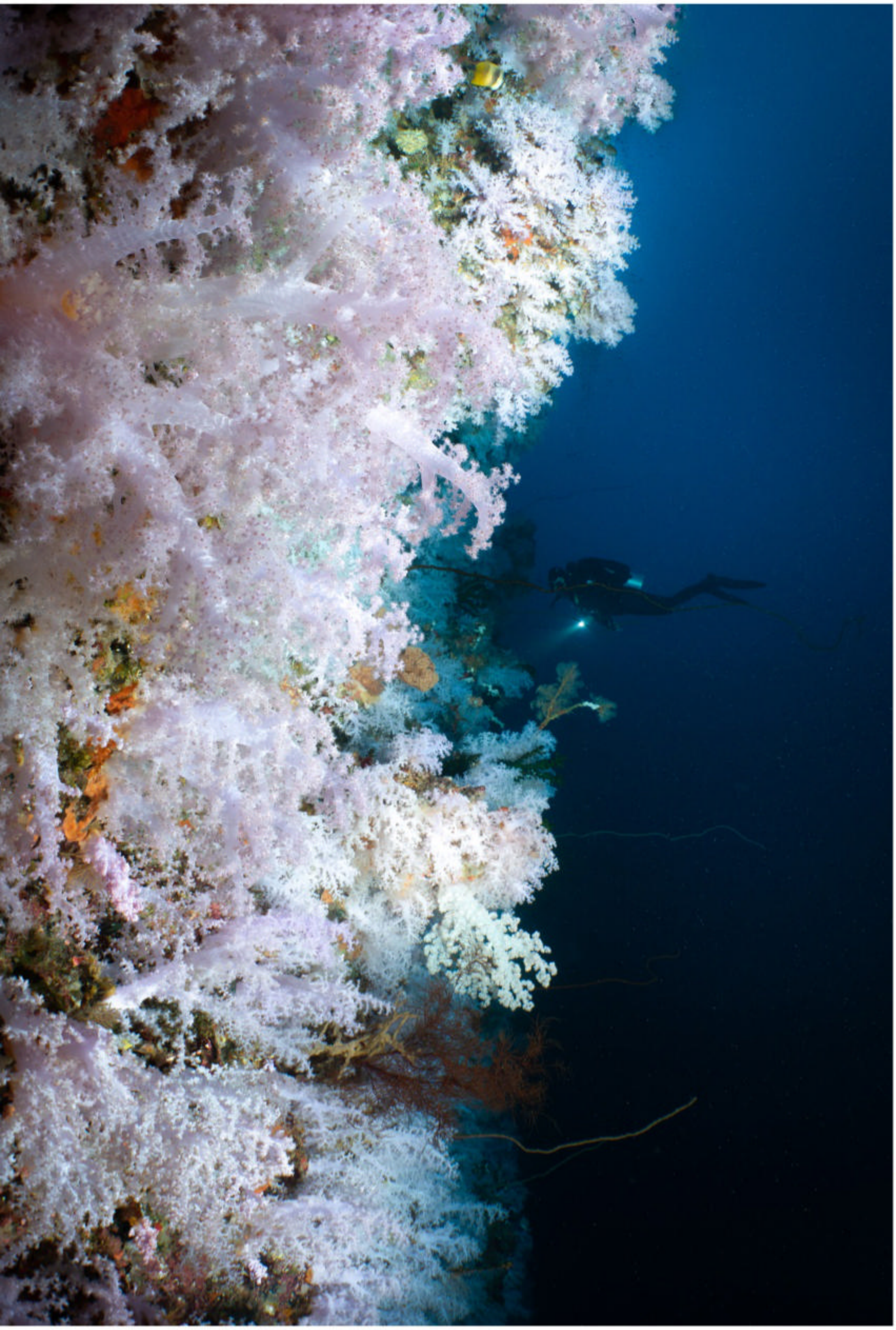
How Do Corals Get Their Colours?

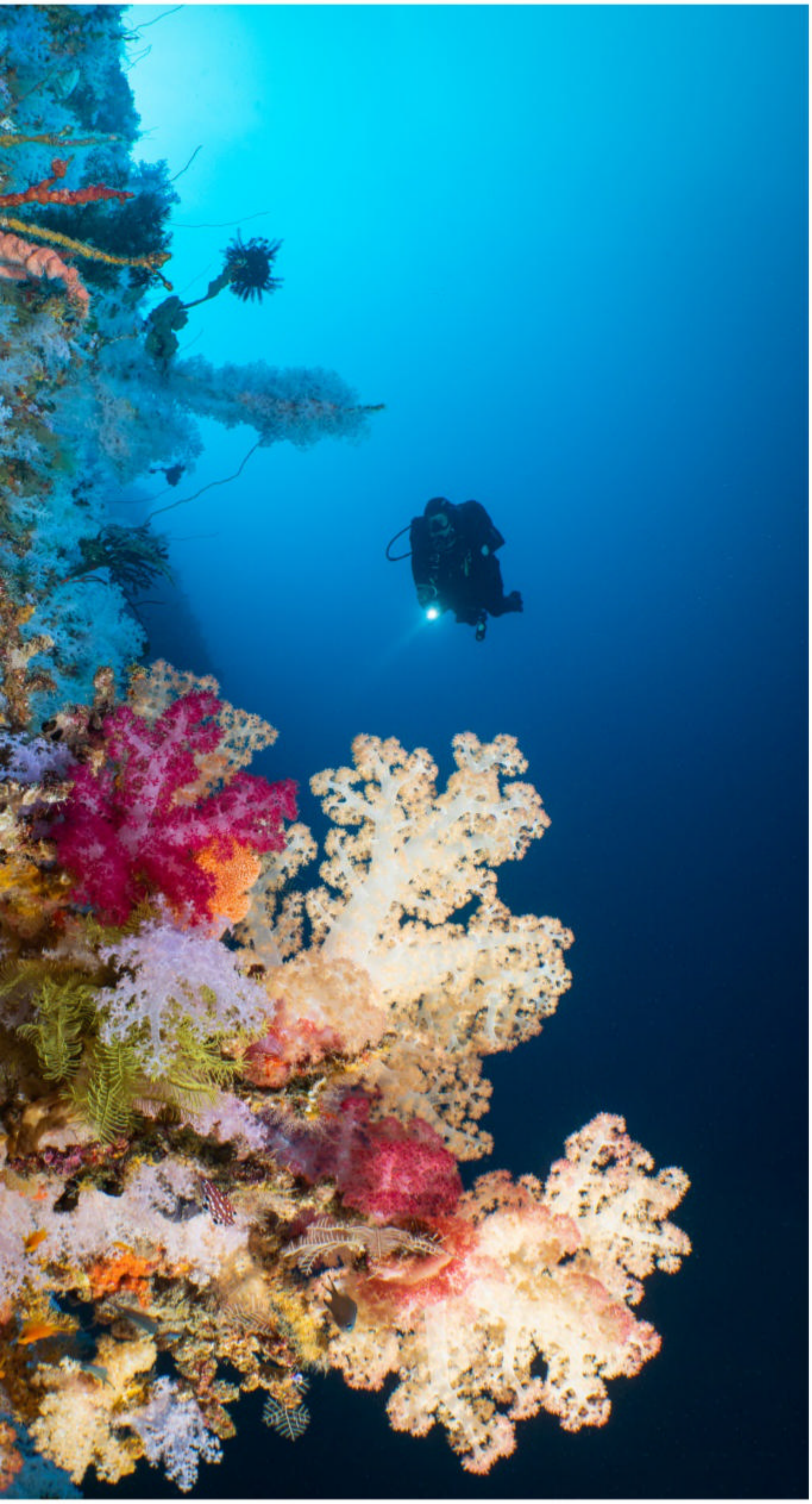
Most reef-building hard corals have polyps with clear, transparent bodies over their hard, white skeletons. It is here that millions of photosynthetic algae called zooxanthellae live. These zooxanthellae produce pigment, and because they reside in the clear tissue of the polyp, these pigments are visible, thereby giving corals their vibrant colours.

For soft corals, it is different. Soft coral like the *Dendronephthya* found in Fiji do not have zooxanthellae. Instead, these corals produce their own non-fluorescent proteins that are often brightly coloured – purple, blue, red, mauve, and so on. It is these chromoproteins – or "reflective proteins", as they are known – that give soft corals their brilliant colours.


Mesogloea
Tentacles
Nematocyst
Mouth
Zooxanthellae
Pharynx
Septum
CaCO3 skeleton

CORAL ANATOMY





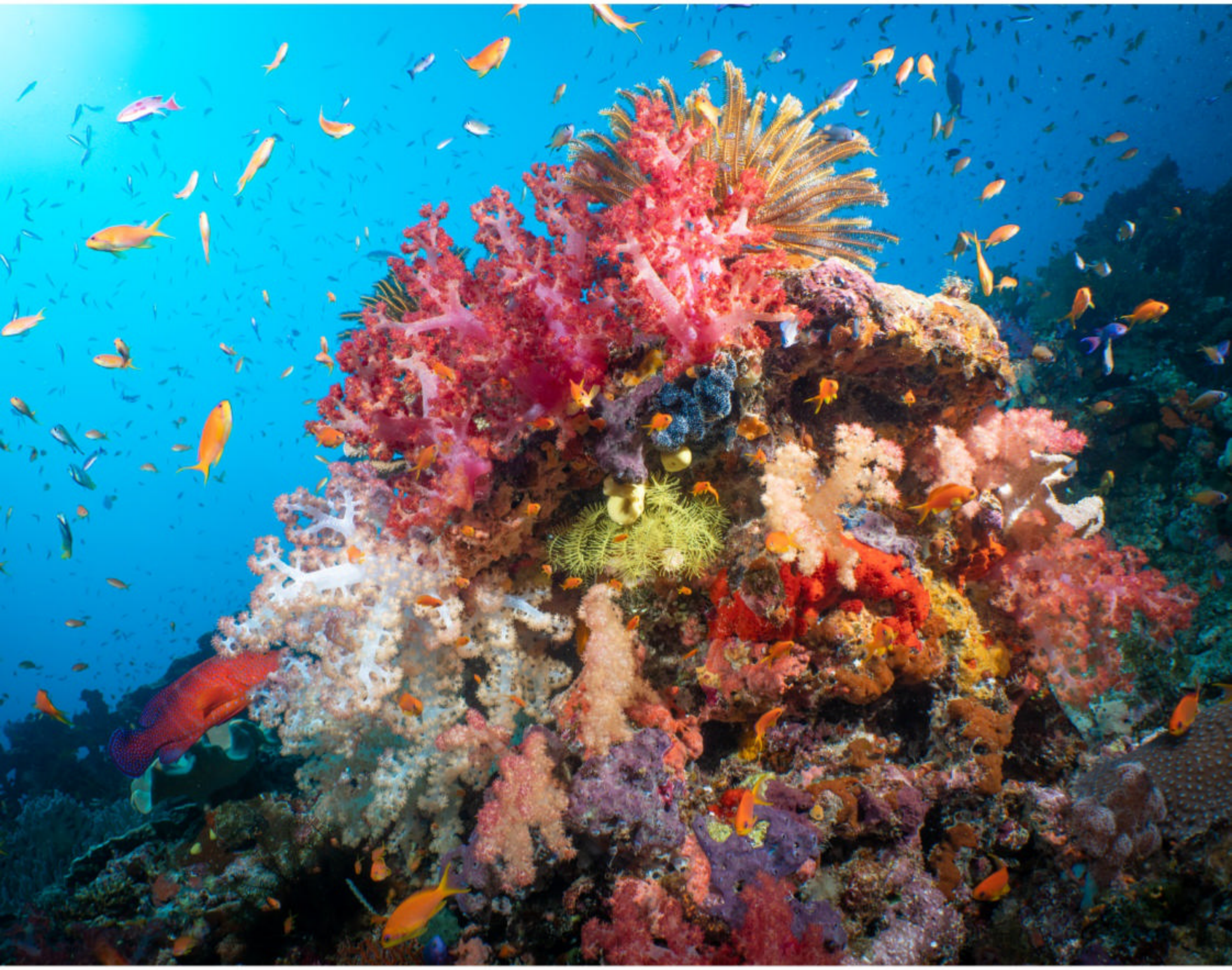
FIJI'S RAINBOW REEFS

Although not within the Coral Triangle, Fiji is deservedly the Asia region's (and the world's) soft coral capital, and it is no stranger to stunning beauty beneath the surface.

Sandwiched between Taveuni and neighbouring Vanua Levu, you'll find one of Fiji's most famous areas: the narrow channel of the Somosomo Strait. Here, the perfect conditions exist for a kaleidoscope of soft corals to bloom on its aptly named "Rainbow Reef". At each change in tide, water funnels through the strait, racing by the reef and providing a deluge of nutrients. This oscillating flow of seawater creates flawless conditions for a profusion of unimaginable soft coral to bloom. Conditions like these are somewhat uncommon, and it is rare for such a large volume of nutrient-rich seawater to be coerced through a narrow shallow passage suited to soft coral growth.

◂◂
Little is known about the magical snow white soft coral of Fiji's Great White Wall, but it blankets nearly every inch of reef wall space, and has done so for several decades. This is not bleached coral; this is healthy coral in the colour white. It is easy to be overwhelmed when you encounter the wall for the first time. At over 100 metres long, beginning at a depth of 25 metres, and extending down to 60 metres, it's a whopping 3,500 square metres of striking white soft coral

◂
In patches, the white soft coral on Fiji's Great White Wall on the Rainbow Reef gives way to splashes of red, pale orange and pink



Stretching out from the hard coral substrate from which they grow, *Dendronephthya* sp. soft coral polyps spare no effort to capture teeny morsels of planktonic food from the rich waters racing by, while armies of cheerfully coloured anthias and other tiny fishes boogie in the current – all jostling for the very same treat. These energetic currents have created one of the most astoundingly vibrant labyrinths of soft coral gardens on our planet.

◀▲ ▲

Underwater blooms! Coral bouquets burst with life, a Fijian soft coral underwater floral masterpiece

◀

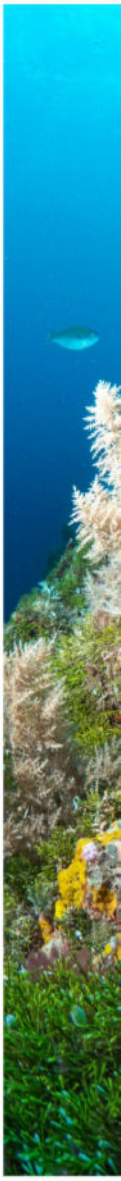
At Fiji's Yellow Tunnel, yellow, gold and orange soft corals are a trademark. Little is known about Fiji's soft corals and why certain areas are prolific with solo colour palettes

These energetic currents have created one of the most astoundingly vibrant labyrinths of soft coral gardens on our planet.

PALAU, PARADISE PROTECTED

Just northeast of the Coral Triangle, you find Palau. For thousands of years, Palauans have strived to maintain a balance with the sea by practicing *bul*, a traditional method of marine ecosystem conservation where they temporarily close areas to fishing in order to allow local marine life to regenerate. This responsibility is passed down, imparting conservation values and behaviours onto future generations. The proof of their work is evident when you see the reefs here.

Along with being a refuge for numerous pelagic species, you will find impressive walls and coral gardens that dominate the substrate. Spectacular deep walls covered in a labyrinth of soft corals and ancient gorgonian sea fans the size of a small bus burst with colour, while striking anemones bloom from what appears to be an impeccable grassy lawn.



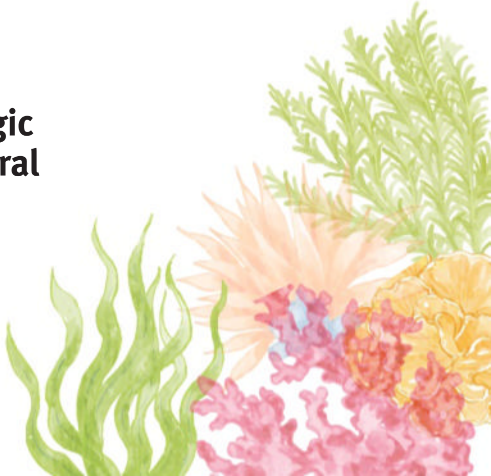
▸

An anemone on the verdant grassy lawn of Dexter's Wall in the marine protected area of Palau

▾

Schooling red bigeye snapper and yellow five-lined snapper make for a colourful scene on the reefs of Palau's Blue Corner

Along with being a refuge for numerous pelagic species, you will find impressive walls and coral gardens that dominate the substrate.



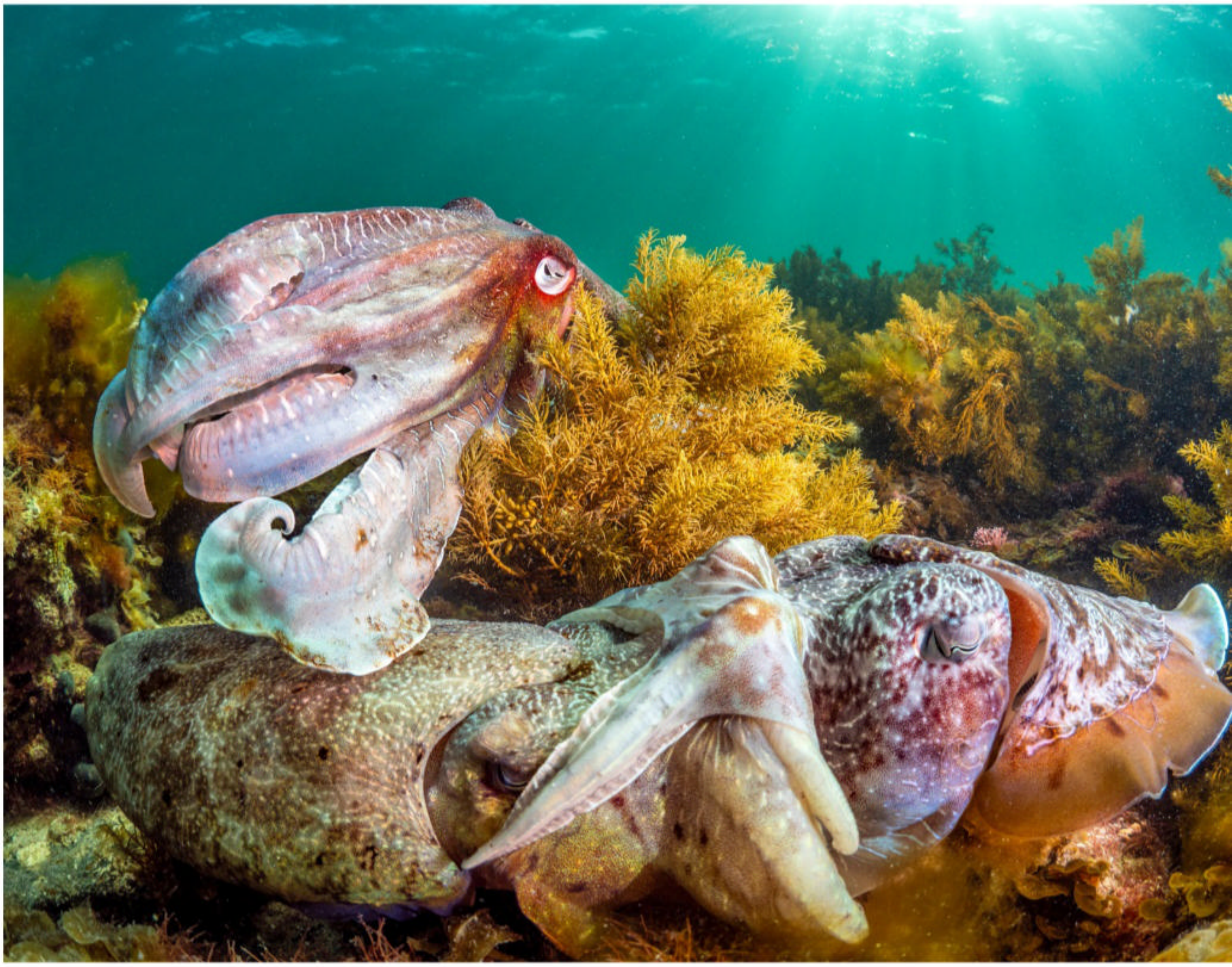
AUSTRALIA: SENTIENT BEINGS IN A GREEN SEA OF DREAMS

While most people will know of Australia’s Great Barrier Reef, many are unaware of the life and colour of Australia’s less tropical seas – the “green seas”. The Great Southern Reef, an interconnected system of temperate reefs spanning over 8,000 kilometres around Australia’s southern coastline, provides a habitat for some of the Australasia region’s most colourful characters. While the reefs themselves may not be as colourful as their tropical cousins, its inhabitants are! Home to some of Australia’s most enigmatic species, from the Australian giant cuttlefish to the weedy and leafy seadragons, these green seas reveal a kaleidoscopic and cosmic display like no other!

▸
Hypnotically strobing, Australian giant cuttlefish costume changes are frequent and galactic – a colourful display to attract a mate!

▾
A smaller male Australian giant cuttlefish uses the art of mimicry to disguise himself as female, hiding his male fourth arm (hectocotylus) and artfully moving in close to mate with the female. These stealthy smaller males are sneaky and are often successful at stealing the female’s heart – right out from under the dominant bull male’s nose! And they do it all with style and colour!

▸▾
Each year in the spring, an elegant dance takes place, where the bright pink fertilised eggs of the female weedy seadragon are transferred to the male’s tail. The male will carry the eggs for around eight weeks until the fully formed baby dragons hatch and venture into the green seas to fend for themselves by taking shelter in the seagrass



The Future of Reefs? When Corals Turn Ghostly White

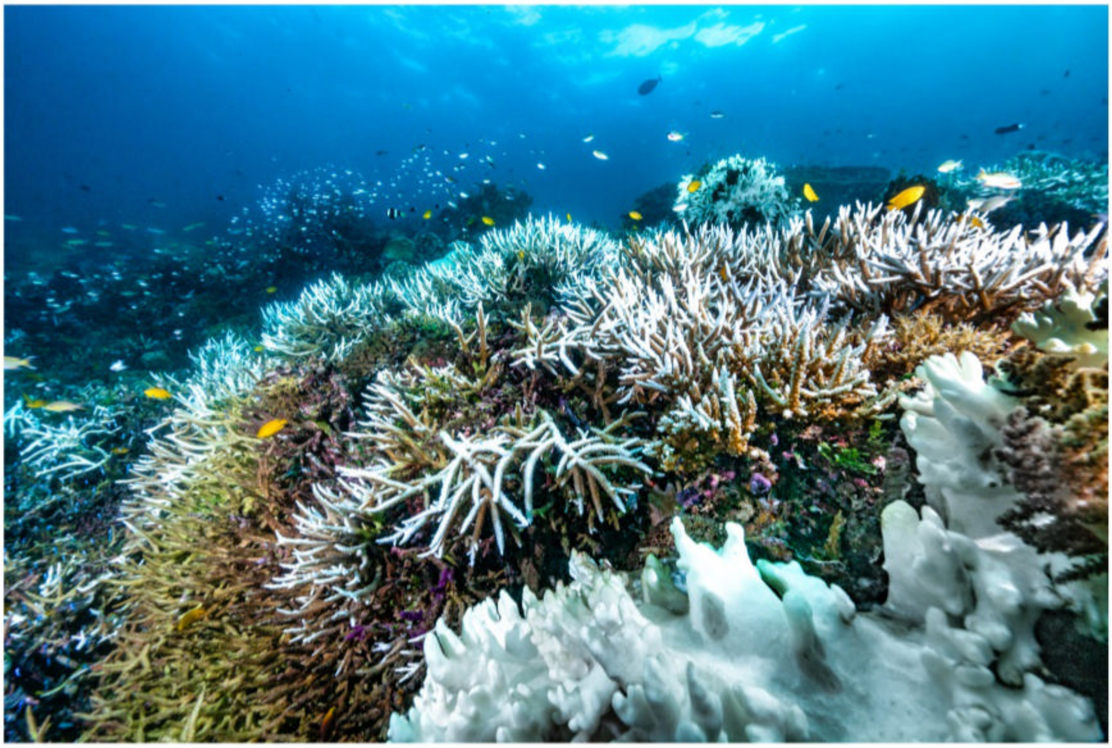
Amidst all this beauty is uncertainty. Reefs globally face significant challenges due to rising ocean temperatures caused by human-induced climate change. While many of our world's reefs are protected by a network of marine protected areas, the impact of humanity is inescapable.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), as a result of rising ocean temperatures at least 74 countries have experienced mass bleaching of coral reefs since early 2023. In April 2024, NOAA declared the world was undergoing its fourth global bleaching event. This is now the largest bleaching event ever recorded.

Satellite images have revealed that a staggering 70 percent of the world's coral reefs have been affected by bleaching across all regions where warm water corals live: the Pacific, Atlantic, and Indian Oceans in both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres.

When under extreme stress, corals will expel their zooxanthellae, beginning the bleaching process. This spells a slow death for the coral species being affected. In some instances, a partial or even complete bleaching of the coral isn't the end, as corals can regain their zooxanthellae – but only if conditions improve. If corals bleach multiple times, their chance of recovery is less likely. Sadly, the world's largest coral reef, Australia's Great Barrier Reef, has experienced no fewer than five severe mass bleaching events over the past decade.

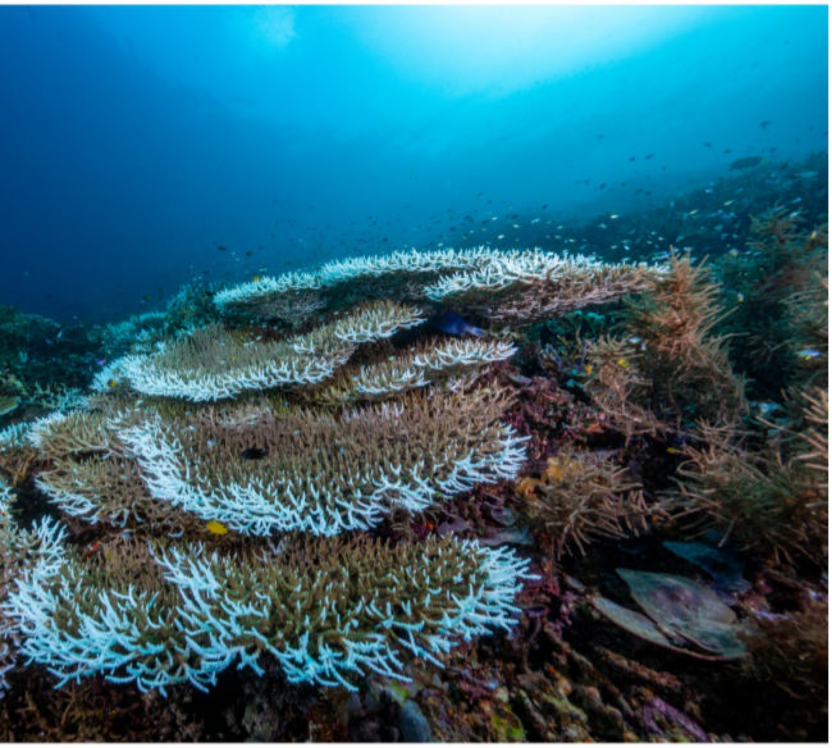
Previously thought to be more resilient that other parts of the world, Indonesia's Raja Ampat, one of the world's most famous and beautiful coral reef areas, suffered significant heat stress and coral bleaching in late 2024. With water temperatures as high as 33°C – more than four degrees higher than their normal 28–29°C – some parts of the reefs were reduced to skeletal white in just two months.



▸
An anemonefish goes about its business in its bleached anemone home

White isn't the only problem. With excessive nutrients entering the water and wastewater going untreated, as is happening increasingly in Raja Ampat, cyanobacteria are beginning to smother the reefs. These blooms of green, red and purple can overtake entire coral colonies in days, blocking out sunlight and releasing toxins that harm fish, which in turn presents a serious health hazard for local people. What's more, when hard corals become bleached due to heat stress, cyanobacteria make it more difficult for the reef to recover.

If global temperatures continue to rise, ever increasing and more widespread coral bleaching will likely occur, especially in tropical regions. Coral reefs also face additional challenges due to overtourism, pollution, destructive fishing practices, overfishing, increased extreme weather events, such as cyclones, and unregulated coastal development. While many of Asia's colourful coral reefs remain resilient and beautiful, their future is becoming increasingly uncertain. ◆ AG

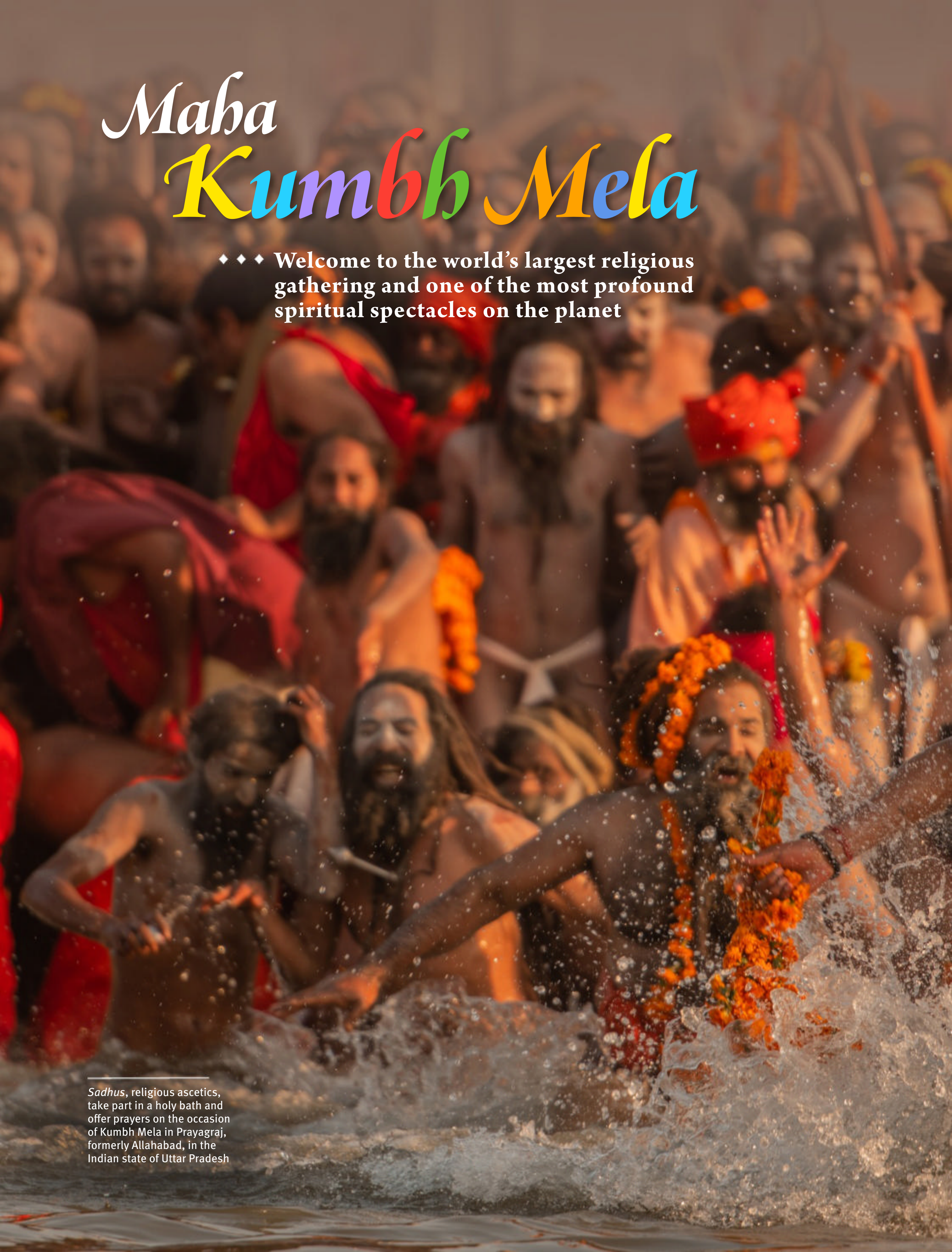


▲
A cocktail of debris and plastic mix as a slick across the ocean's surface in Indonesia. This has sadly become a common sight throughout Asia's waters

◂ ◂◂
Over a period of just two months in late 2024, some reefs in Indonesia's Raja Ampat went from colourful and healthy to stark white

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Based in Melbourne, Australia, **Anita Verde** and **Peter Marshall** have a passion for the planet's wild places, and through their images and narratives hope to inspire better appreciation and protection of the natural world. When not underwater, you'll find them on a mountain somewhere. To see more of their work, please visit their website, *www.summitstoseasphotography.com*.



Maha Kumbh Mela

Welcome to the world's largest religious gathering and one of the most profound spiritual spectacles on the planet

Sadhus, religious ascetics, take part in a holy bath and offer prayers on the occasion of Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj, formerly Allahabad, in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh

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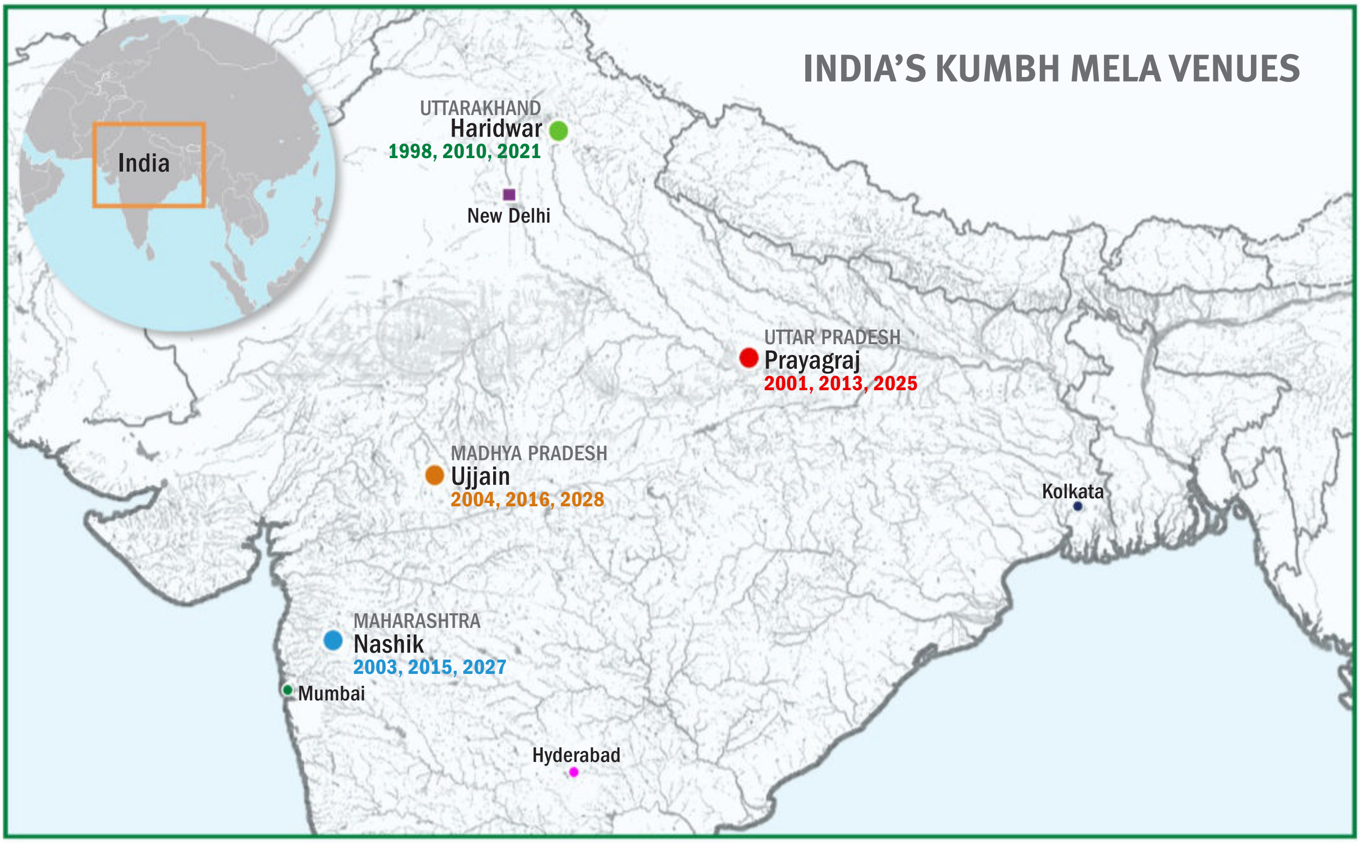
Imagine standing at the banks of a sacred river as the sun rises, watching millions of devotees – draped in saffron, chanting ancient mantras – step into the water in unison. The air is thick with incense, drumbeats echo across the sky, and ash-smeared *sadhus* stride past with tridents in hand. Welcome to the Maha (Great) Kumbh Mela!

India is no stranger to crowds, colour, and chaos, but its *melas,* or festivals, are something else entirely. These are not just religious or cultural events; they are deeply human experiences, where tradition meets transcendence, and devotion blends with spectacle. If you're a traveller looking to immerse yourself in the soul of the country, there's no better way than to dive into one of India's many *melas*.

◂ The Kumbh Mela is held at Prayagraj every 12 years, most recently in 2025. The Kumbh Mela is also held at three other sites on different 12-year cycles: Haridwar (Uttarakhand), Nashik (Maharashtra) and Ujjain (Madhya Pradesh)

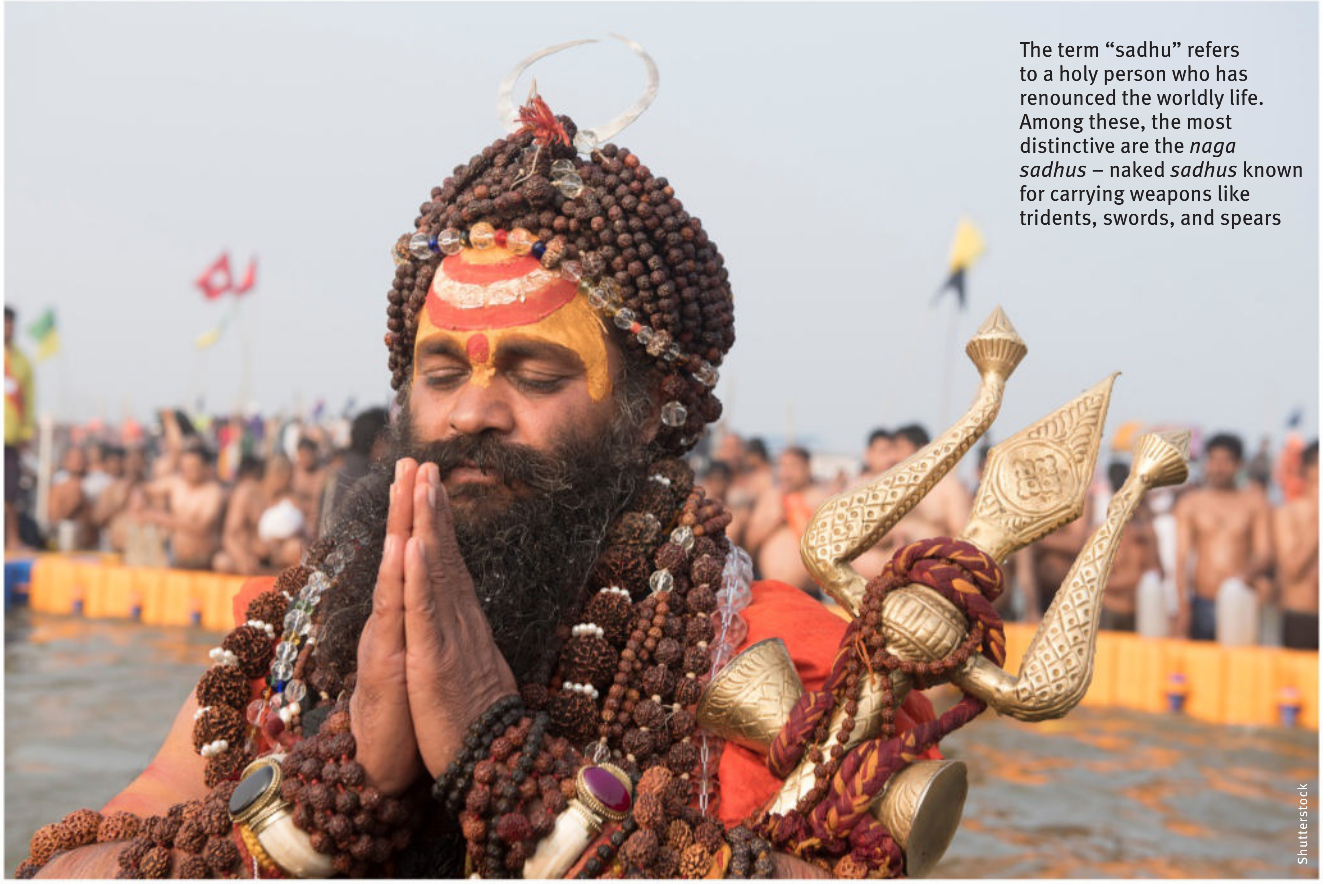
SPIRITUALITY ON A GRAND SCALE

Held every 12 years at four holy cities – Prayagraj (formerly Allahabad), Haridwar, Ujjain, and Nashik – the Kumbh Mela is a cycle of mass pilgrimages unlike anything else in the world. The Maha Kumbh Mela, occurring once every 144 years at Prayagraj, is the most sacred and awe-inspiring of them all.


INDIA'S KUMBH MELA VENUES
India
UTTARAKHAND
Haridwar
1998, 2010, 2021
New Delhi
UTTAR PRADESH
Prayagraj
2001, 2013, 2025
MADHYA PRADESH
Ujjain
2004, 2016, 2028
Kolkata
MAHARASHTRA
Nashik
2003, 2015, 2027
Mumbai
Hyderabad

Held every 12 years at four holy cities – Prayagraj (formerly Allahabad), Haridwar, Ujjain, and Nashik – the Kumbh Mela is a cycle of mass pilgrimages unlike anything else in the world.

According to Hindu mythology, during a celestial tug-of-war between gods and demons over a pot of *amrit* (nectar of immortality), a few drops spilled onto Earth at these four locations. Since then, pilgrims have travelled to these cities in search of spiritual cleansing and liberation. Bathing in the sacred rivers – the Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, and Shipra – during the *mela* is believed to wash away a lifetime of sins.



The term “sadhu” refers to a holy person who has renounced the worldly life. Among these, the most distinctive are the *naga sadhus* – naked *sadhus* known for carrying weapons like tridents, swords, and spears

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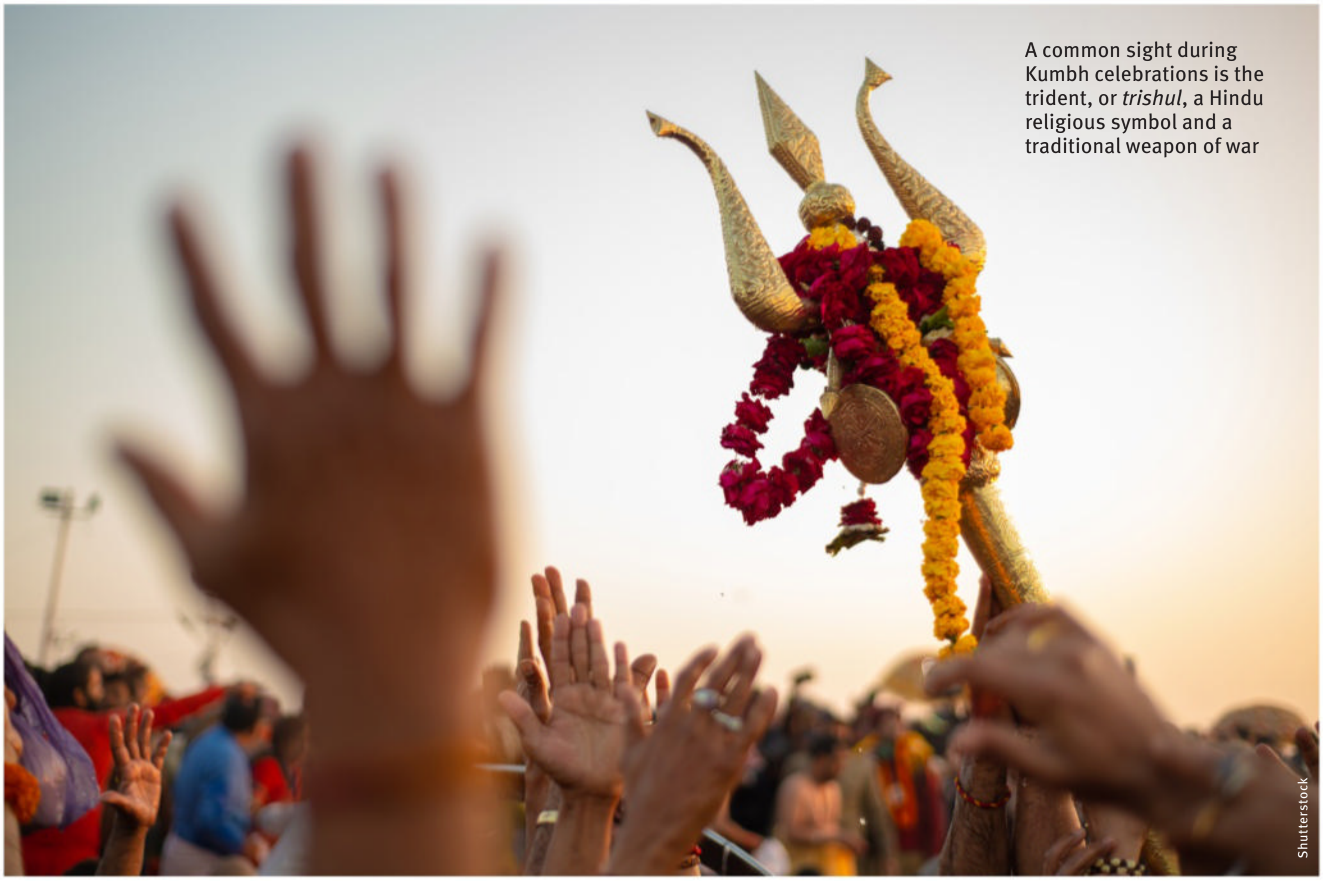

A common sight during Kumbh celebrations is the trident, or *trishul*, a Hindu religious symbol and a traditional weapon of war

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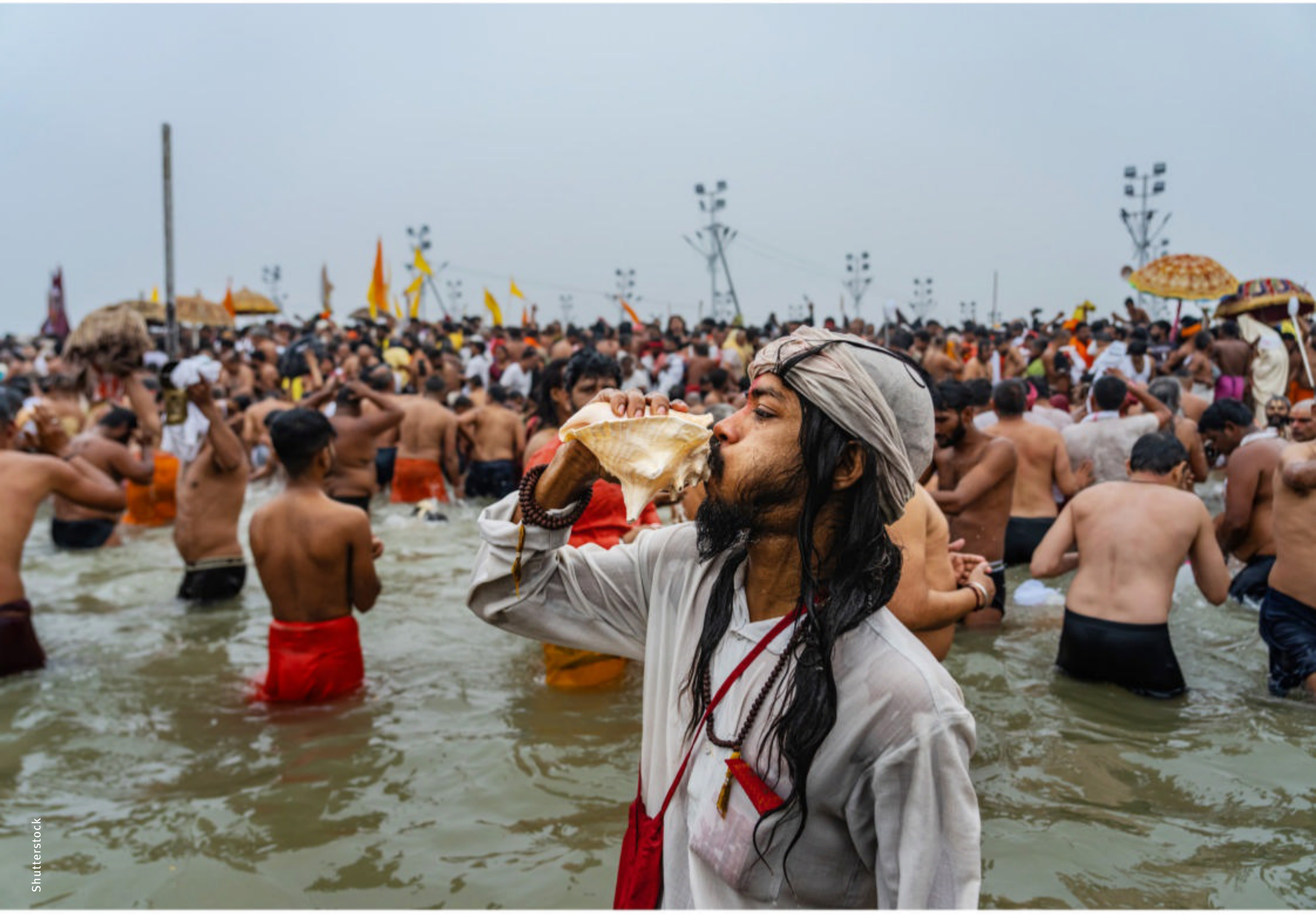
The most notable feature of the Kumbh Mela is the Shahi Snan, or royal bath, where *naga sadhus* – nude ascetics covered in ash – march ceremonially toward the river, backed by rhythmic drumming and religious chants. The sheer scale is breathtaking: Over about 45 days, the 2013 Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj welcomed over 120 million people, a staggering figure, but the 2025 Maha Kumbh, which wrapped up in February, saw the participation of more than 620 million people – over a third of India's roughly 1.4 billion population.



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◀▲
Sadhus arrive at Sangam Ghat to take the first bath of the Kumbh Mela on the occasion of the Makar Sankranti festival

◀
The Shahi Snan – meaning "royal bath" – is believed to cleanse the soul and bestow spiritual benefits. The sacred act is accompanied by prayers and chanting of mantras

▲
A *sadhu* blows a conch while bathing in the sacred waters

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Despite the crowds, there's an incredible sense of order and serenity. A vast tented city emerges on the riverbank, complete with roads, sanitation, healthcare, and accommodations, all built to host hundreds of millions. Among the chaos, you'll find moments of deep calm: a *sadhu* meditating silently, a family offering prayers, or a spontaneous *bhajan* (devotional song) session under a starlit sky.

◄▲
Nestled along the sacred confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna, and the Saraswati rivers, the "tent city" offers an opportunity to experience the world's largest religious gathering in comfort and style

◄
An ordinary family offers prayers after taking a bath at Sangam Ghat in the early morning

▲
The sacred *bhaboot* that *naga sadhus* smear on their bodies is a preparation of wood ash and sandalwood paste baked in a cow dung fire

DID YOU KNOW?

During the busiest day of the Maha Kumbh Mela, on Mauni Amavasya, January 29, 2025, an estimated 57 million devotees took a holy dip at Triveni Sangam, the confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna, and Saraswati rivers

MAHA KUMBH MELA 2025 BY THE NUMBERS

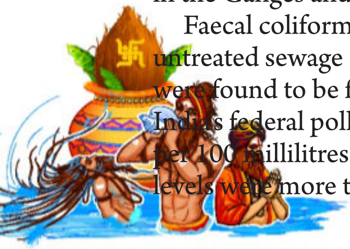
- 4,000 hectares set aside for the festival
- 160,000 tents
- 40,000 police and security officials
- 15,000 sanitation workers
- 100 car parks for over half a million vehicles
- 67,000 street lights
- 150,000 toilets
- 25,000 bins

THE GREEN KUMBH?

Hundreds of millions of people descending on one location comes with its challenges. This year's *mela* was marred by deadly crowd crushes on two separate occasions, and there were reports of dangerous levels of contamination at key bathing sites. Despite the Indian government touting sustainable initiatives and sanitation efforts, the Central Pollution and Control Board (CPCB), part of India's Environment Ministry, published a report on high levels of coliform faecal bacteria in the Ganges and Yamuna rivers.

Faecal coliform levels, a key indicator of untreated sewage and faecal matter in water, were found to be far above the safe limit set by India's federal pollution board of 2,500 units per 100 millilitres. According to the report, levels were more than 1,000 over the safe limit at various parts of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers around Prayagraj. This is despite India's top environmental court directing the state and federal pollution boards to ensure the river water was clean enough to bathe in – and drink – well before the festival began.

Since first taking office in 2014, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made cleaning India's holiest river, the Ganges, a top priority, investing billions of dollars on sewage treatment and removing surface waste. The authorities touted the 2025 gathering as a "Green Kumbh", rolling out sustainable initiatives including banning single-use plastics, erecting eco-friendly toilets, and introducing electric rickshaws. After major bathing days, an army of some 15,000 sanitation workers were hired to tackle the clean-up.



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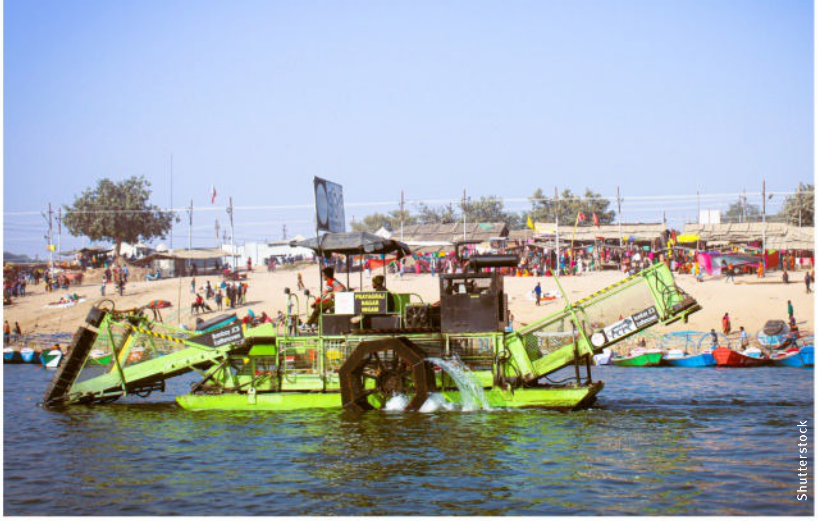
◄◄ In 2025, there were six particularly auspicious days to bathe, with three of them designated as royal bath days when the *naga sadhus* take to the waters



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◄ For the 2025 Kumbh Mela, the state government deployed trash skimming machines to try and keep the Ganges and Yamuna free from plastic bottles, religious offerings, and even dead animals

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◄ The largest gathering of humanity on the planet raises serious concerns about waste and water pollution

Since first taking office in 2014, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made cleaning India's holiest river, the Ganges, a top priority, investing billions of dollars on sewage treatment and removing surface waste.

However, with the Ganges running through 50 Indian cities pumping out about three billion litres of sewage daily – only a fraction of which is treated – making the water safe for ritual bathing was always going to be a near-impossible challenge. Plus, the mammoth crowd sizes at this year's Kumbh Mela – over 50 percent more attendees than expected – didn't make the task any easier.

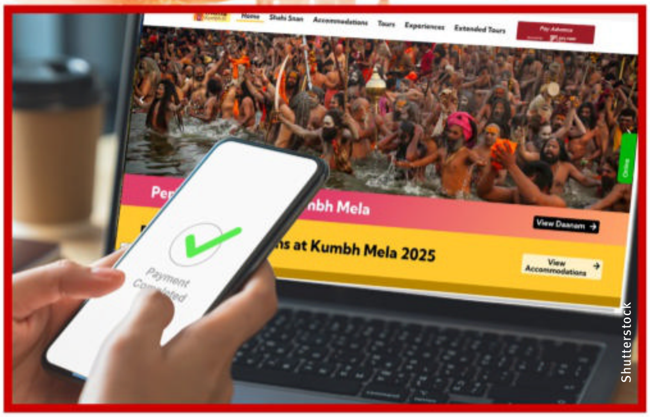
Many Indians acknowledge that their holy rivers are unclean, but in a country where the air is routinely declared too toxic to breathe, people simply accept that polluted water is just another thing that will adversely impact their health. Besides, for most of the devotees attending the Kumbh Mela, taking part in the sacred rituals is much more important than such concerns.

India's *melas* aren't just events; they are journeys into the heart of a civilisation. Whether you're seeking spirituality, adventure, or simply a once-in-a-lifetime experience, pack your curiosity and an open heart – the magic of the *mela* awaits. ◆ AG

JOIN THE MÊLÉE: MELA TRAVEL TIPS

What sets India's *melas* apart is their immersive quality. You're not just observing culture; you're part of it. Whether it's joining pilgrims for a river dip, bargaining for bangles in a bustling bazaar, or swaying to a folk drumbeat under the stars, *melas* offer a window into India's living traditions. For travellers, they're a reminder of the world's enduring power to gather, connect, and celebrate. Here are some tips to get the most out of *melas*:

NEXT KUMBH MELAS
Nashik (2027)
and
Ujjain (2028)



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PLAN AHEAD

Major *melas* like Kumbh or Pushkar draw huge crowds. **Book accommodation well in advance**.

RESPECT CUSTOMS

Dress modestly, **remove shoes when required**, and always **ask before photographing** people.

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PACK SMART

Carry **comfortable walking shoes**, reusable **water bottles**, and **light layers**.

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GO LOCAL

Try the street food, **listen to local stories**, and **travel with a guide** who understands the cultural nuances.

Beyond Kumbh: India's Other Magnificent *Melas*

While the Kumbh Mela is the crown jewel, India is dotted with hundreds of regional fairs and festivals, each with its own flavours and traditions.

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PUSHKAR CAMEL FAIR, RAJASTHAN

One of India's most photogenic festivals, the Pushkar Camel Fair is a heady mix of livestock trading, Rajasthani culture, and spiritual ritual. Held every November in the holy town of Pushkar, the fair begins with a religious bath in the Pushkar Lake and ends in a carnival of colour – camel races, folk dances, fire-breathers, and even moustache competitions. It's an eye-popping blend: golden dunes, ornate camels in pompoms and mirrors, gypsy music by the campfire, and the thrill of desert bazaars. Don't miss the hot-air balloon rides at dawn or the rare chance to sleep in a luxury desert tent.

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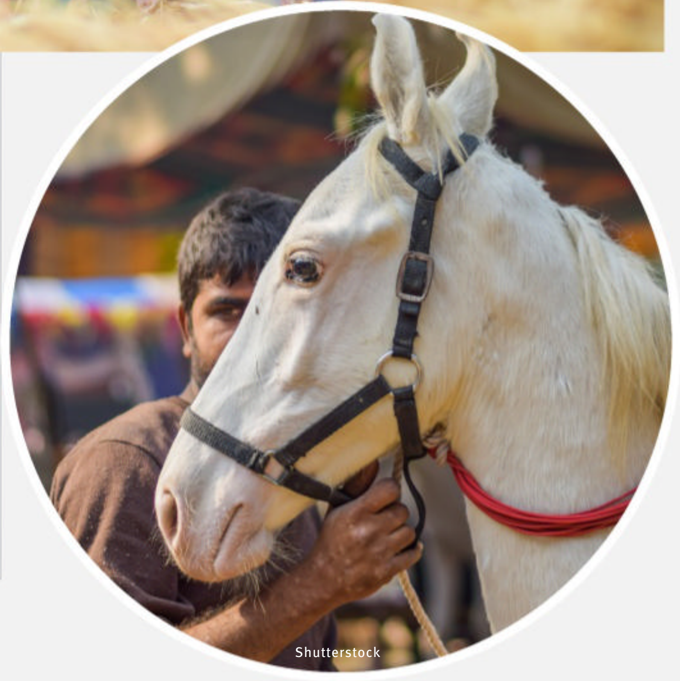
SONEPUR MELA, BIHAR

Held on the banks of the Ganges and Gandak rivers in Sonepur, this *mela* was once Asia's largest cattle fair – even elephants were traded here until recently. The fair, which takes place every November during Kartik Purnima, is a mix of rural charm and religious significance. Pilgrims visit the Hariharnath Temple, while visitors explore vast animal markets, magic shows, and circus performances. It's less polished than Pushkar, but for those wanting raw, authentic India, Sonepur delivers.



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GANGASAGAR MELA, WEST BENGAL

If the Kumbh Mela is the king of pilgrimages, then the Gangasagar Mela is its spiritual cousin. Held annually in January on Sagar Island, at the confluence of the Ganges River and the Bay of Bengal, this *mela* attracts millions of pilgrims who take a dip on Makar Sankranti (a mid-winter harvest festival) to cleanse their souls. Reaching the island is an adventure in itself – via train, boat, and foot – but the experience is worth it. There's something deeply moving about standing at land's end with thousands of others, all united by faith and the rhythm of the sea.

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HEMIS MELA, LADAKH

Far from the heat and dust of the plains, the Hemis Mela in the remote mountains of Ladakh offers a different kind of spiritual high. Celebrated in June or July at the Hemis Monastery, the festival honours Guru Padmasambhava, the founder of Tibetan Buddhism. Colourful masked dances, haunting music, and serene mountain vistas create a mystical atmosphere. For travellers, it's a chance to explore Ladakha's rich Buddhist culture while soaking in Himalayan beauty.

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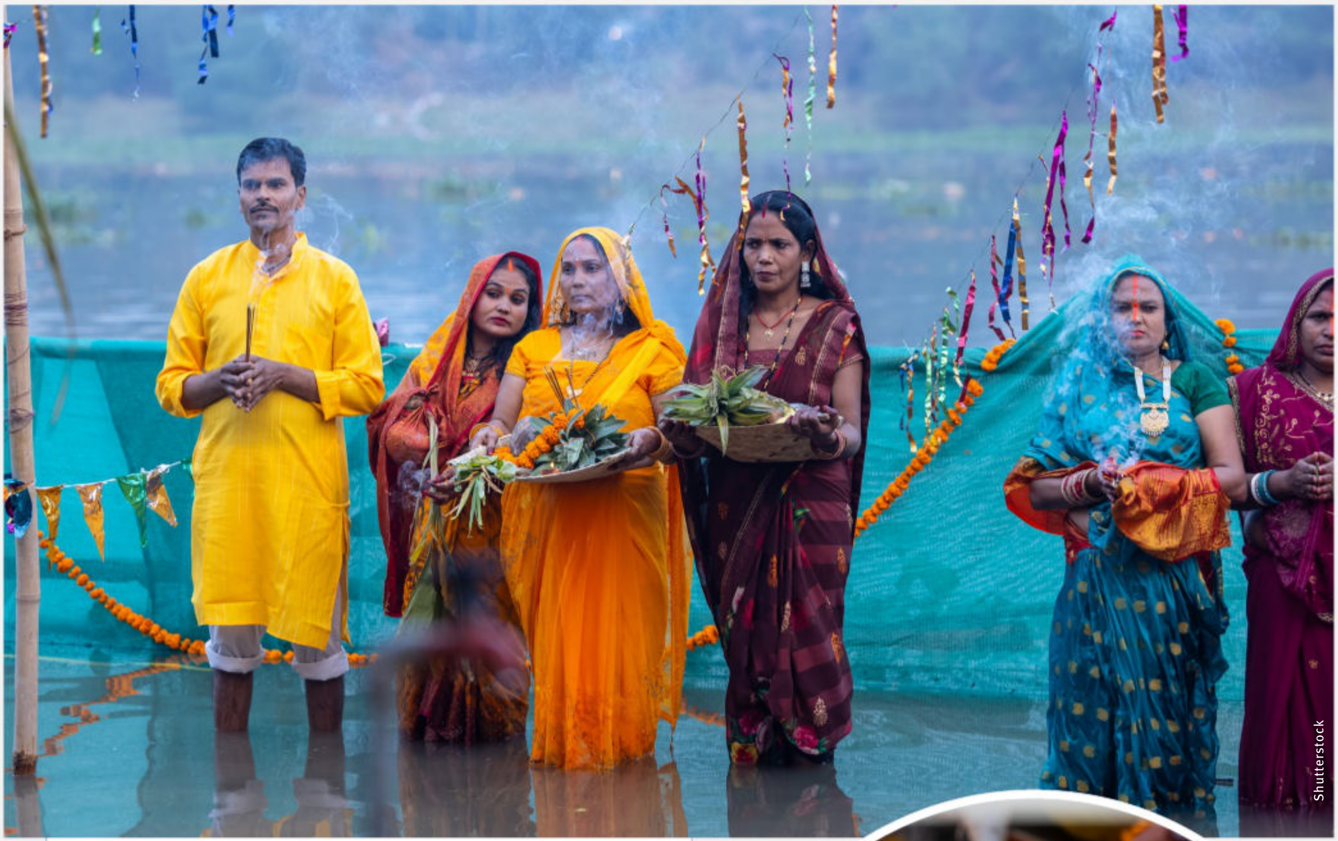

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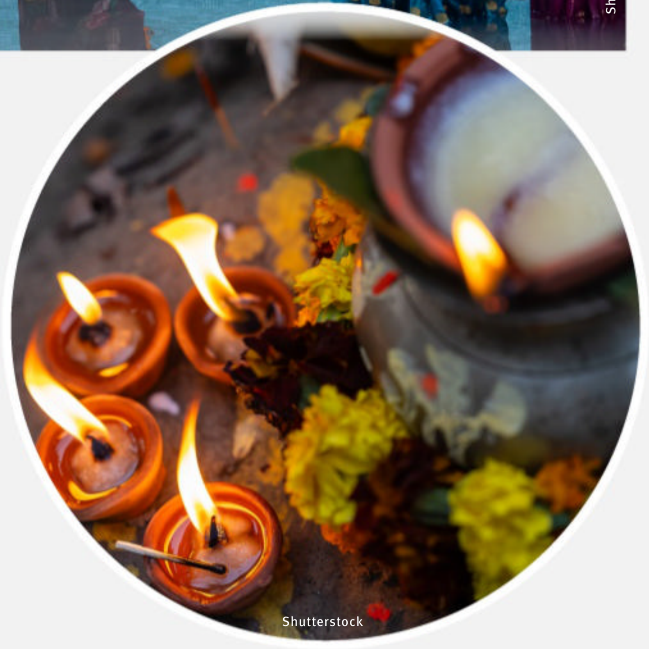
CHHATH PUJA MELA, BIHAR AND UTTAR PRADESH

Not exactly a *mela* in the conventional sense, but the Chhath Puja transforms riverbanks across Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh into glowing, devotional gatherings. Women, often fasting for days, offer prayers to the rising and setting sun, standing in waist-deep water with bamboo baskets of fruit and lamps. The celebrations are intimate yet grand, and the makeshift *melas* around them offer local sweets, folk music, and a unique lens into the devotional heart of India's heartland.



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Kings of the Road

By Lester V. Ledesma

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FOR HIRE
PASAY ROTONDA ~ ALABAN
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LTFRB Case No.
NCR-2001-01053
OPTR:- Andrea Zulueta
ROUTE:- ALABANG-PASAY ROTONDA
T.O.S:- PUJ/for HIRE
CAPACITY
Grs Wt 3800
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G. Motors

Eight decades after it was first conceived from leftover wartime vehicles, the flamboyant jeepney of the Philippines has endured as a bona fide national symbol

The ubiquitous jeepney adds colour and character to city streets all over the Philippines

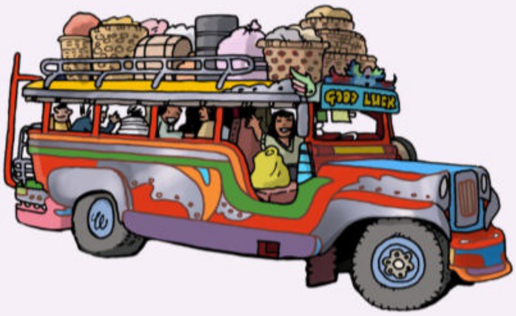
GOD'S GIFT
ESTOQUE SON'S

Morning rush in the Philippines begins just after sunrise, with the sky still basking in pastel hues and the country beneath it girding for another day of work. In the capital Manila, the thoroughfares slowly fill with vehicles of every shape, size and wheel count. Things are just as busy at the transport hubs, where pavements and loading stations brim with everyday folks setting off on their morning commute. These bustling scenes could just as well be from any other modern Asian city, if not for the uniquely Pinoy form of public transport vehicles that ply the local streets. These diesel-powered chariots are instantly recognisable by their stainless steel chassis, their loud colours and their distinct silhouettes. Thailand has its multihued tuk-tuks and India has its zippy autorickshaws; in the Philippines, we have our own kings of the road: the jeepneys.

◂
Rush hour in Panglao Island: The classic Pinoy joke says: “How many passengers can a jeepney take? Just one more!”

DID YOU KNOW?

Around **nine million commuters take the jeepney each day** in Metro Manila – compared to just two million who ride buses.



ARAW MO 'TO!
DIMPLE STAR Transport
Globe
DIVINE GRACE store
2 DAYS P5
CLASH OF CLANS
TEXT COC5 TO 8888
GIFT OF GOD
BALETE
KALIBO

Globe
BALETE
JEEPNEY TERMI
BALETE - KALIBO - DUMAGUIT
MAY REKLAMO KA?
SENIORS
FWB 596

Rare is the type of automobile that defies description and plays by its own rules. Borne from the ashes of World War II, the first jeepneys were made from surplus US Army GPs (or "Jeeps") that were converted into passenger vehicles. Since then, they have become an essential part of everyday life. The Pinoy jeepney is the mover of the masses – a ubiquitous vehicle that ferries most of this country's 115 million citizens to work. It's also a beloved national icon, a flashy fiesta-on-wheels that is said to embody the Filipinos' creative and fun-loving spirit.

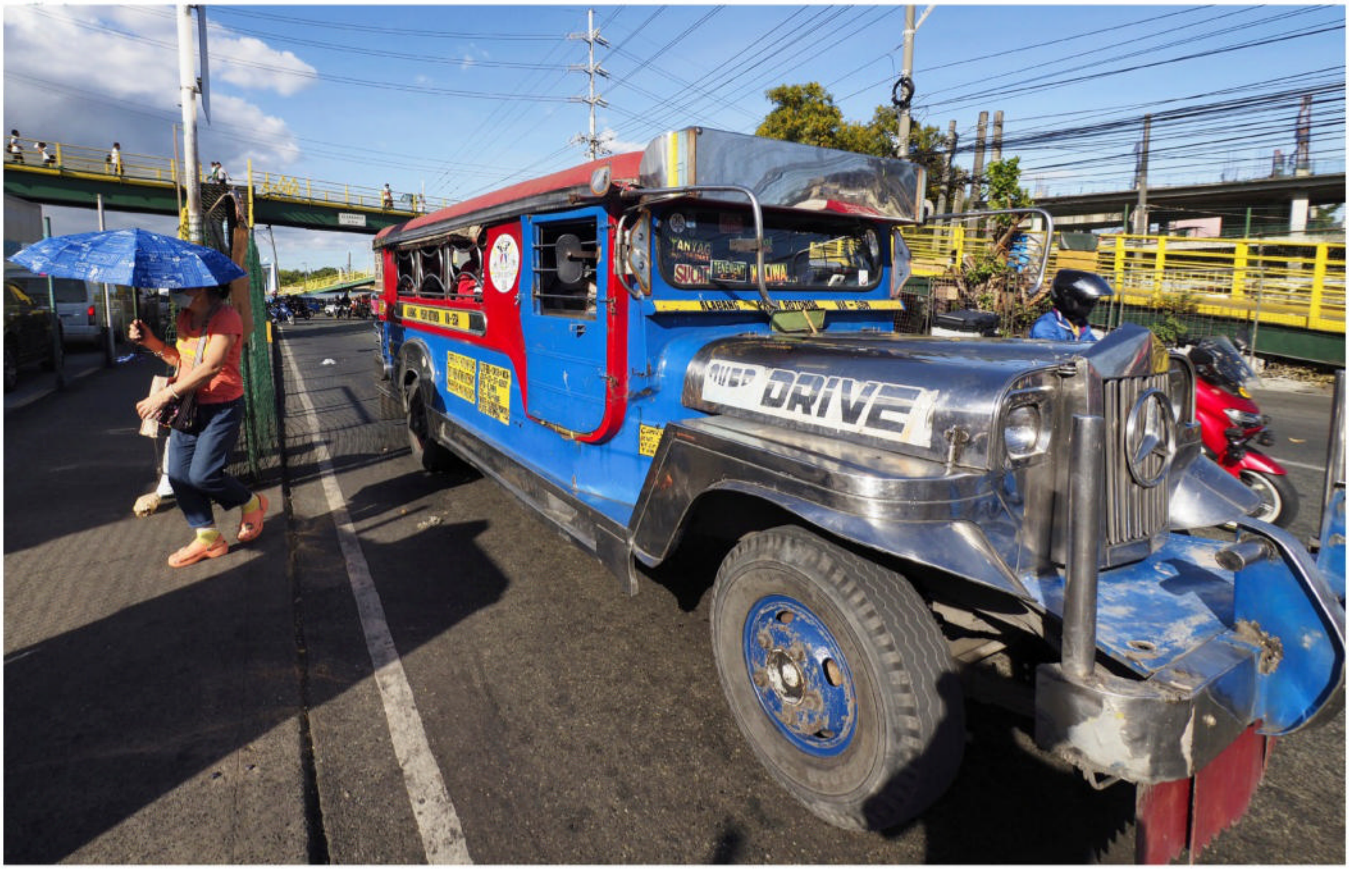
Borne from the ashes of World War II, the first jeepneys were made from surplus US Army GPs (or "Jeeps") that were converted into passenger vehicles.

◂
Jeepneys at the station await passengers in Kalibo City, on the island of Panay. Unlike bus companies, jeepneys are privately-owned transport enterprises – and often the main source of income for their owners

DID YOU KNOW?

For the **1964 New York World's Fair**, a **Sarao jeepney** was **exhibited** at the Philippine pavilion as a national symbol of Filipino culture.

PHILIPPINES
FOR HIRE



Pimp My Ride

It may be an everyday sight in these parts, but this ride is far from ordinary. The jeepney is somewhat like a minibus, but a lot more handsome and certainly much more interesting. These days it's made from shiny metal sheets that are cut, folded, stamped, drilled and assembled by hand over a powerful truck engine. Its then decorated in a visually loud and typically Pinoy brand of aesthetic. On its flanks, hand painted vignettes depict anything from biblical portraits to pop culture scenes, to Philippine landscapes. These provide a pleasing counterpoint to the jeepney route's stopping points, which are listed along the length of the body. While the rear hosts the walk-in entrance to the passenger section, the front proudly displays a garish nameplate bearing the jeepney's name (usually a woman's), or a badass monicker – like, say, "Sweet Lover" or "Road Warrior" – or a biblical chapter and verse (John 3:16 is a popular one).

Owners who have the extra money can also add on the ultimate centrepiece: a metal sculpture of a horse (or horses) mounted right on the hood – a throwback to the time when horse-drawn carriages were the preferred mode of travel. But, of course, there are even more accoutrements available – think extra-long radio antennae, external horns, luxury car logos (because everyone wants a Mercedes-Benz), even clusters of coloured lights that, at nighttime, make the jeepney look like a rampaging Christmas tree.

Foreigners who see these pimped-up jeeps naturally assume that the prettiest ones attract the most passengers. "Nah, they all just want to get where they're going, so they'll hop aboard the first one they see," explains driver Mang Raul, who's taking me through downtown Manila on "Josephine", his shiny chrome jeepney. "But, of course, we drivers also want our jeepneys to be different from the rest."

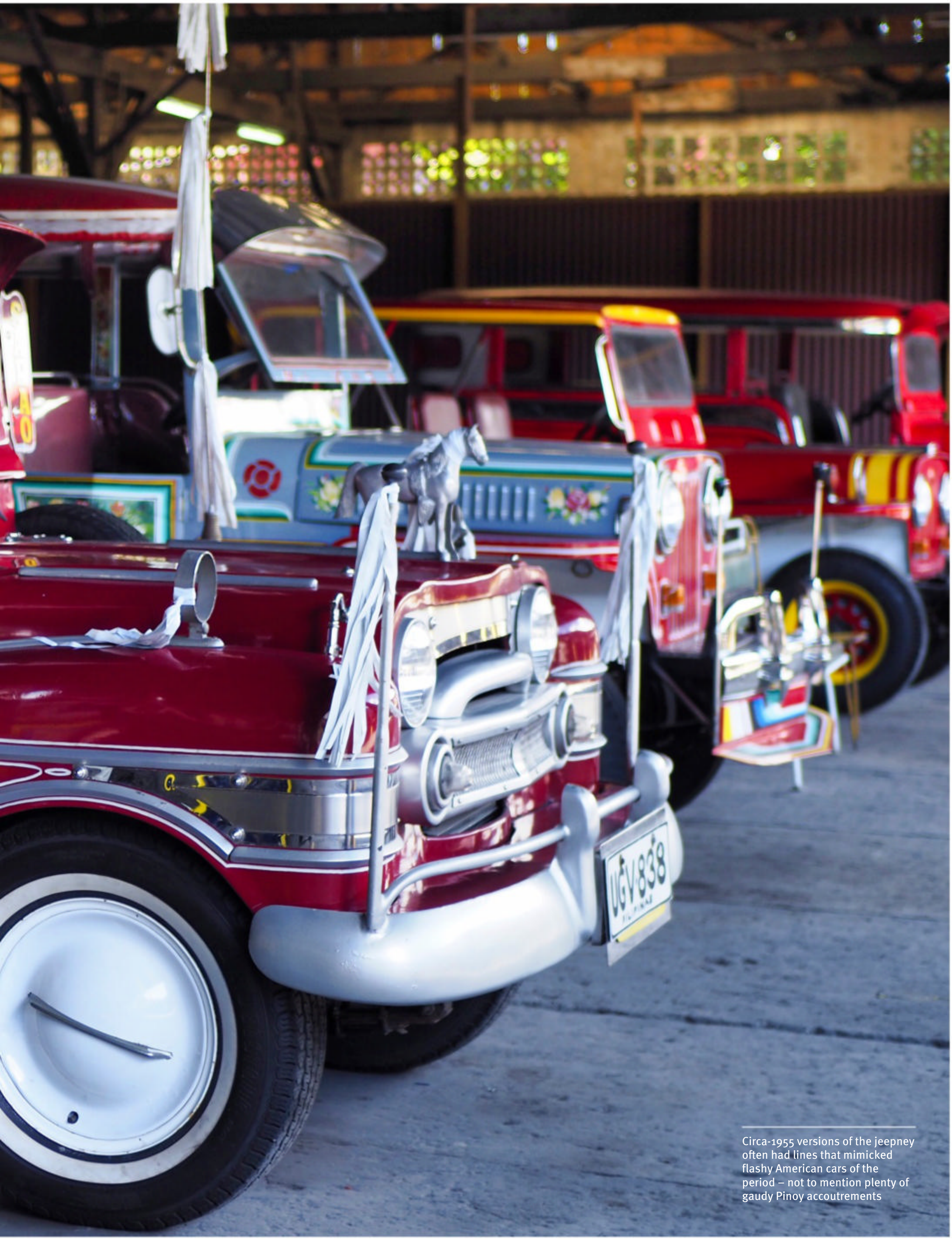
▲
This Metro Manila-bound jeepney sports the colours of the Philippine flag

▶▲
A 1980s' jeepney on display at the Sarao Museum boasts hand-painted folk art

▶
The metal horse is a nod to the horse-drawn carriages of yesteryear. The multiple rear-view mirrors are just for show

PHILIPPINES
SARAO
SARAO

SARAO


UGV 838
PILIPINAS

Circa-1955 versions of the jeepney often had lines that mimicked flashy American cars of the period – not to mention plenty of gaudy Pinoy accoutrements

The term "no-frills" does not apply to even the simplest garden-variety commuter jeepneys

Jeepney designs are as original and unique as their owners – no two jeepneys are alike!

The Daily Commute

I join the commuting crowd on this sunny weekday morning, and I am lucky to get a seat beside the jeep captain out front. Having relied on these vehicles every day for most of my university life, I am well acquainted with the quirks and creases of jeepney transport. Behind me, the passenger section is almost full, its two long benches loaded with people sitting almost knee-to-knee. I see young students browsing their phones and office workers resting with folders stacked neatly on their laps. There's also an itinerant vendor with his merchandise tied up in bundles, opposite a mother with a pair of bleary-eyed kids – along with many other people from all walks of life. If this were in the countryside, we'd probably have a farmer or two clutching his chickens – and this jeepney would no doubt be carrying commuters on its roof!

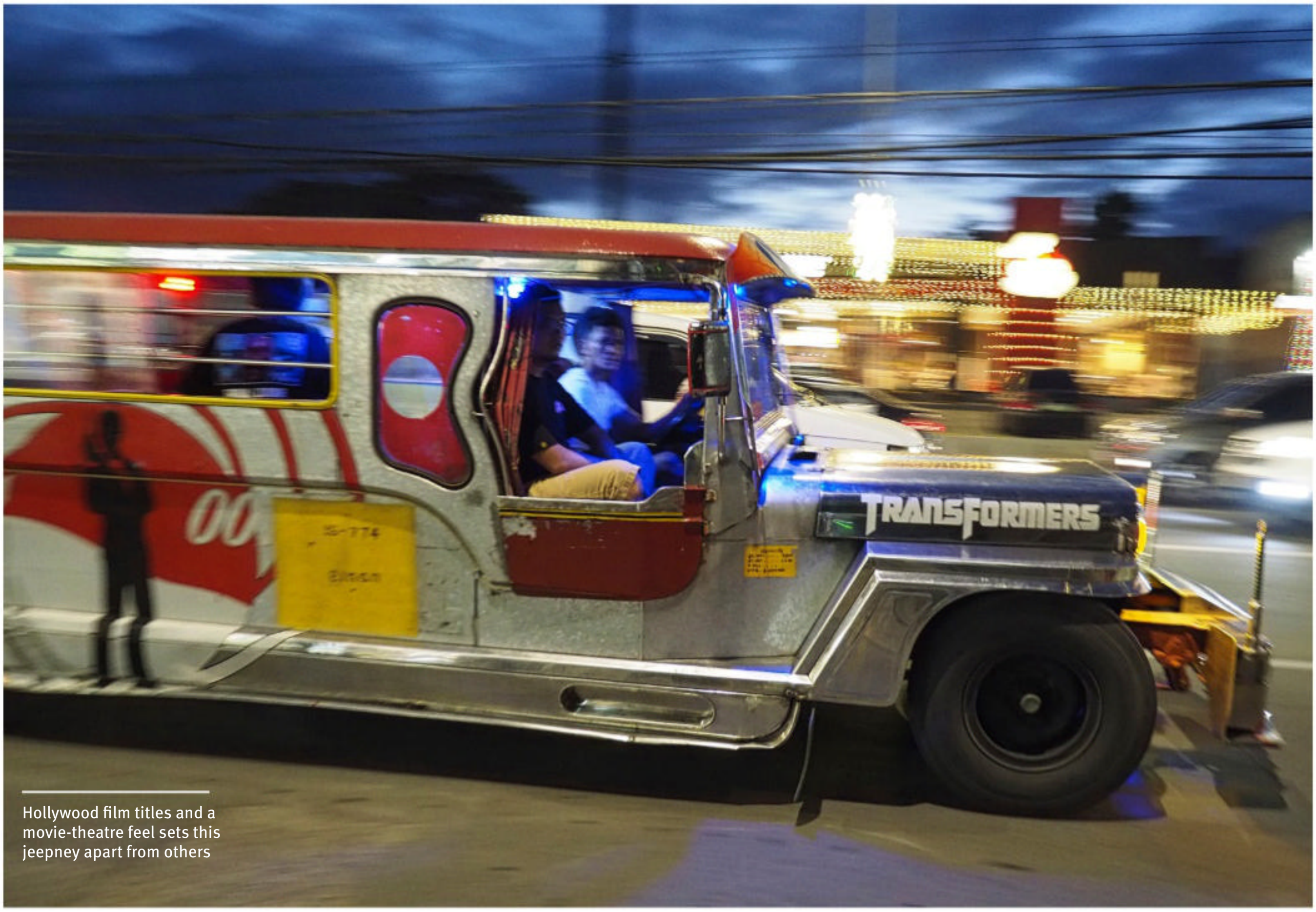
Whoever else might be riding this crate, you can be sure that they will always be able to afford its fare. The normal jeepney rate is Php13 – that's around US cents 20 for the first four kilometres – a pittance compared to the decidedly higher-end trains and taxis. In a country where the minimum daily wage hovers around Php600 (roughly USD11), this mode of transport is the cheapest, most readily available way to travel in the country.

Our jeepney moves with the leisurely pace of Manila traffic, and we all settle down for a hopefully-not-too-long, air-cooled (read: no aircon) trip. Mang Raul cranks up the volume on the radio, then steers the silvery Josephine past cars, pedestrians, motorbikes and street signs while counting fares and passing out change. He stops frequently to drop off and pick up customers. Jeepney rides aren't for those in a hurry, but none of the passengers seems to mind one bit. Throughout the trip, the students sing quietly to themselves, the blue-collar folks chat, and the kids look out of the window, enjoying the breeze and the view. We'll get there when we get there, as the saying goes – and despite the tropical heat and crawling traffic, we'll get there with a smile.

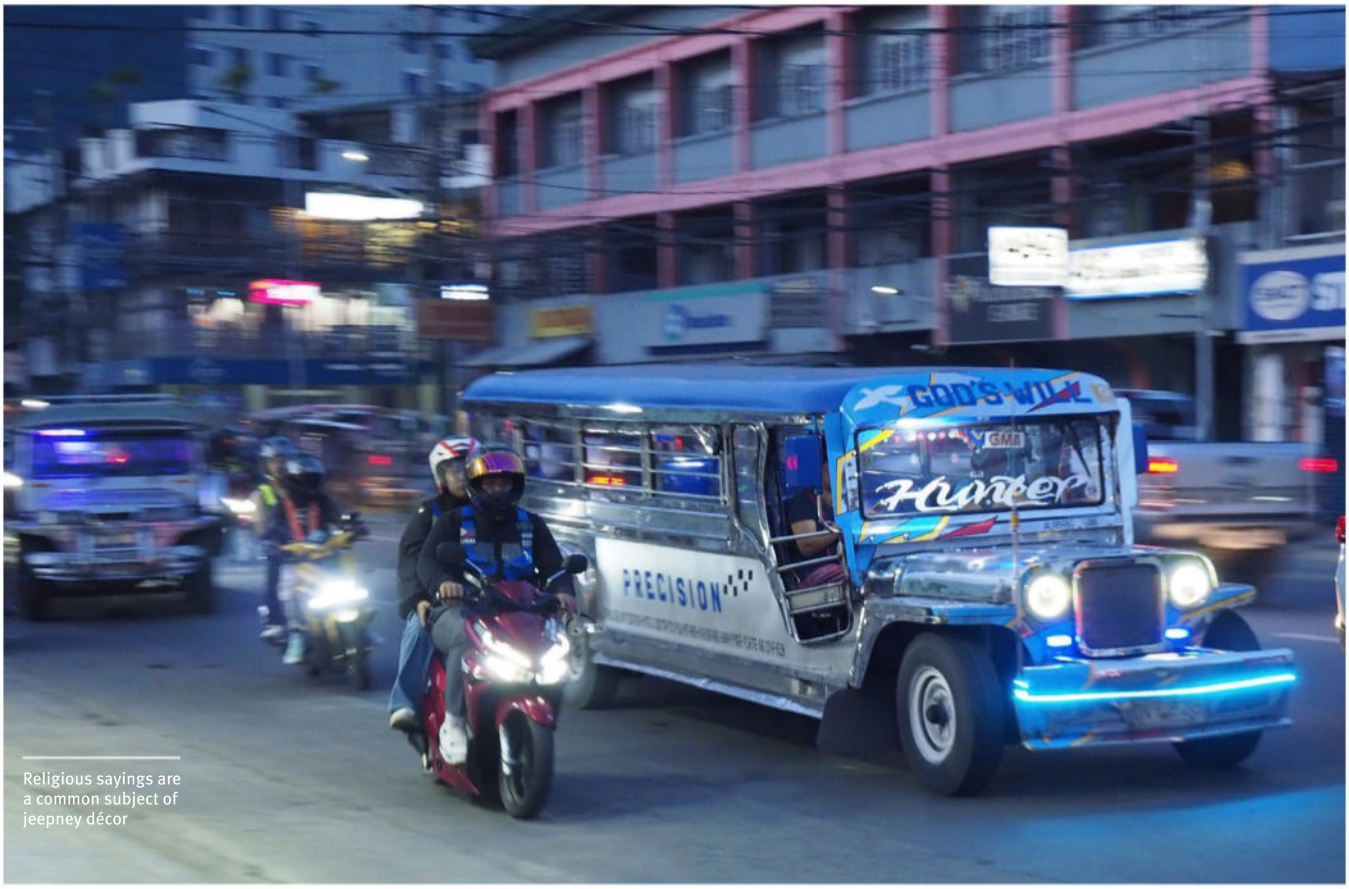
▾

Jeepney commuters covet the passenger front seat because of the more comfortable space that it offers

BICUTAN
COSTPAE
EXPRESS
LAWAY


TRANSFORMERS
007

Hollywood film titles and a movie-theatre feel sets this jeepney apart from others


GOD'S WILL
Hunter
PRECISION

Religious sayings are a common subject of jeepney décor

A Brief History of the Jeepney

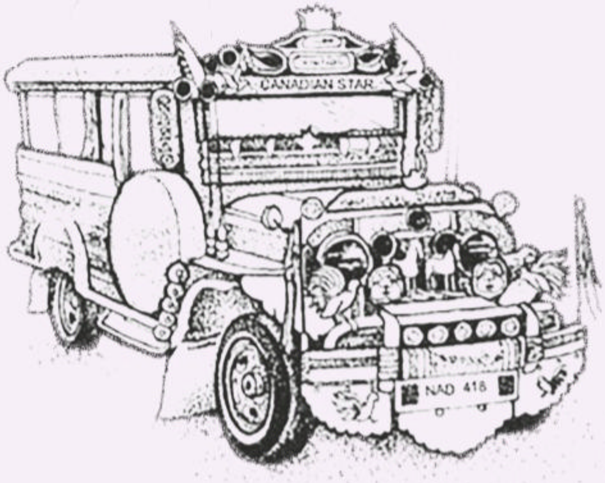
The primary mode of public and private transport in the Philippines during the Spanish colonial period (1565–1898) was the *kalesa*, or *calesa* in Philippine Spanish. First introduced in the 1700s, this two-wheeled horse-drawn carriage remained the main form of cheap public transport during the American colonial period (1898–1946). In the early 1900s, the American colonial government began the motorisation of public transport, introducing cheap imported automobiles that were dubbed "auto calesas" – AC for short.

Philippine Photographs Digital Archive

B.M.C
AUTO CALESA
B.M.C.
Richard Ragodon

In 1932, the first vehicle modified for seating more passengers, called the DKW-AC, was introduced by a Filipino entrepreneur. A few years later, a Russian American Jewish entrepreneur called Emil Bachrach started the Bachrach Motor Company (BMC), which began manufacturing a similar vehicle known as the BMC-AC. It had a back-entry carriage style that was joined to the chassis – unlike the DKW-AC with its side-entry carriages – and seated two people on each side. It was later expanded to seat up to 10 people.

When World War II ended, hundreds of surplus Jeeps by Willys and Ford were sold or given to the locals, who began stripping them down and making modifications, such as adding metal roofs for shade and installing two long, parallel benches to accommodate more passengers. By 1953, a former *kalesa* driver turned mechanic, Leonardo Sarao, established Sarao Motors, which started producing assembly-built jeepneys. The Sarao jeepney would become such a ubiquitous sight on the streets on Manila that the brand outnumbered other jeepneys by almost 7 to 1.



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Long Live the King?

The jeepney has been a fixture on Philippine roads for almost 80 years now, and despite the passage of decades, its handmade nature and utilitarian mindset have barely changed. Noting the need for cleaner and more eco-friendly mass transportation, the national government is aiming to update this classic Pinoy icon. The modern version of the jeepney is envisioned to have Euro 4 compliant engines, world-class safety standards, and a larger carrying capacity, along with conveniences like automated payment terminals, GPS and air-conditioning. Major car manufacturers have risen to the challenge, redesigning a jeepney that heeds government requirements without losing the spirit of the original vehicle.

It's an uphill process, though, as jeepney owners remain wary of the high costs of procuring, maintaining and operating these newfangled jeeps. Unlike private bus companies, which can upgrade an entire fleet of vehicles in one go, the roughly 270,000 public jeepneys in the Philippines are run on individual franchises.

"There's no easy way to do this in a country where a jeepney is often the main source of income for a driver and his family," observes Sarao Motors' LJ Sarao, whose grandfather Leonardo was one of the first craftsmen to convert the US Army's jeep into the Filipino people's jeepney. "How can you convince them to give up their single most valuable asset, and replace it with a vehicle that's many times more expensive?"

The government is working to enact policies that will ease the jeepney's transition into the 21st century, but for now, this vision remains tantalisingly out of reach. From the ashes of World War II, through decades of political turmoil and economic development, the jeepneys have managed to survive by sticking to their old-school roots. Hopefully, sometime in the near future, these Philippine icons will make their most significant transformation yet – as proudly modern, and still beloved, kings of the road. ◆ AG

Unlike private bus companies, which can upgrade an entire fleet of vehicles in one go, the roughly 270,000 public jeepneys in the Philippines are run on individual franchises.

◂
Rush hour traffic always includes plenty of jeepneys on the streets of Manila

◂▴
Passengers help push a jeepney that's bogged down in mud

LESTER V. LEDESMA has written and photographed the world for well over two decades. This Manila-bred multi-awarded writer-photographer has done food, culture and heritage stories from the edge of the Himalayas to remote islands of the South Pacific. Based in Singapore, he was a field editor for *ASIAN Geographic*, and continues to showcase his work in countless regional magazines. He loves to swap stories over cold beer, hot coffee or street food. *www.lesterledesma.com*

Rainbow Sleeves

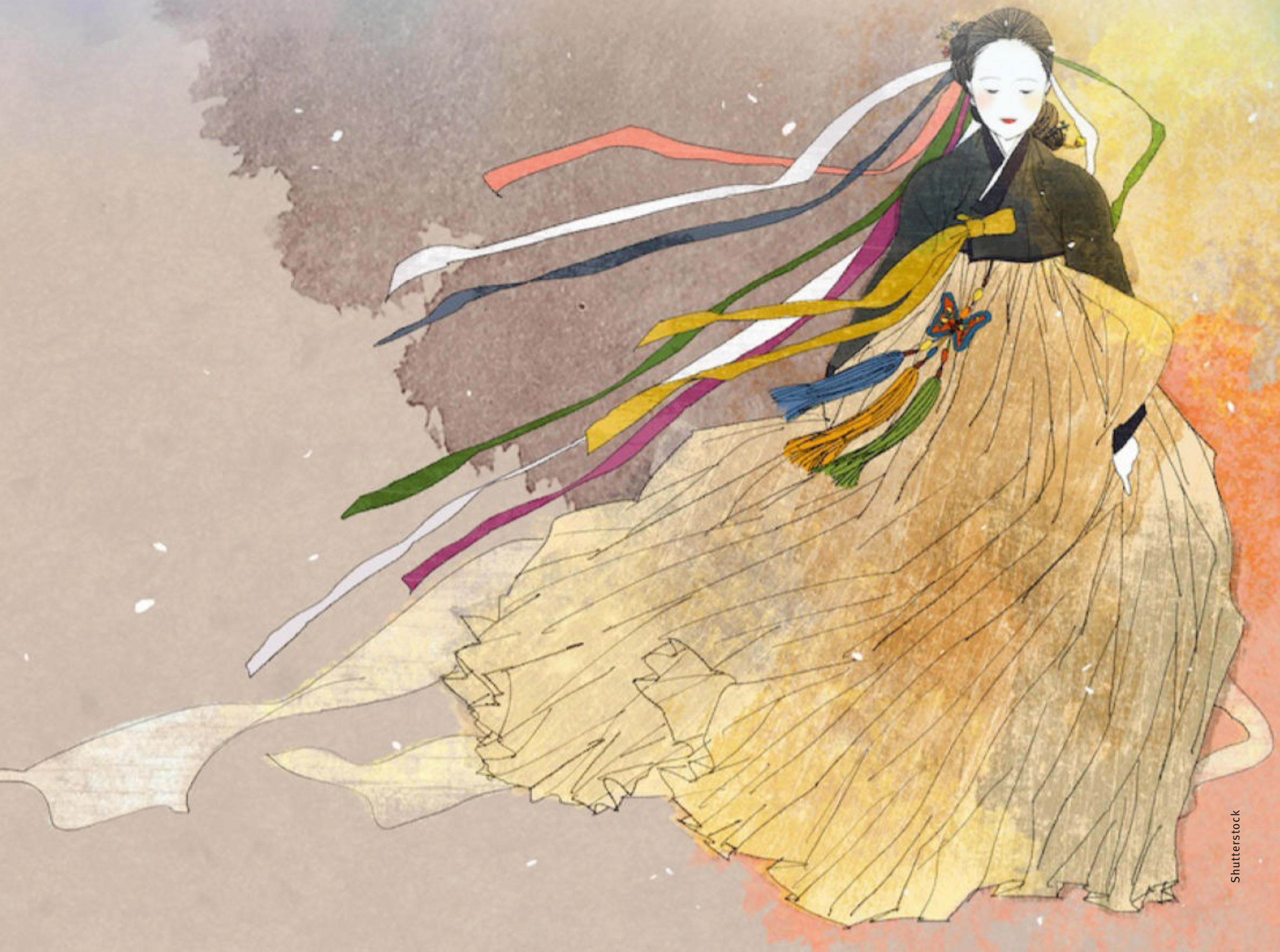
Joan Grigsby, adapted from a Korean original

Her rainbow sleeves are gay as golden wine
Poured from a silver flask to porcelain bowls.
Between the guests she moves. Their wet lips shine.

Their eyes grow dry and hot as burning coals,
Watching her bend to pour their perfumed wine,
Watching her rainbow sleeves above the bowls.

One gives her amber beads like honeyed light,
Another, coral drops for her to wear
Like folded peach buds in her ears tonight,
While one sets bright blue feathers in her hair.
Gay are her sleeves!
Yet, in the lanterns' light,
Her face – a peony flower – reveals despair.

Joan Grigsby (1891–1937), a Scottish poet, briefly lived in Korea and was drawn to a culture and aesthetic very different from that of her upbringing. Grigsby engaged in creative re-envisioning of traditional Korean poems in a manner that highlighted the concerns of women. "Rainbow Sleeves" recalls the brightly coloured striped sleeves of the *jeogori*, the jacket of the *hanbok*, the traditional Korean garment.



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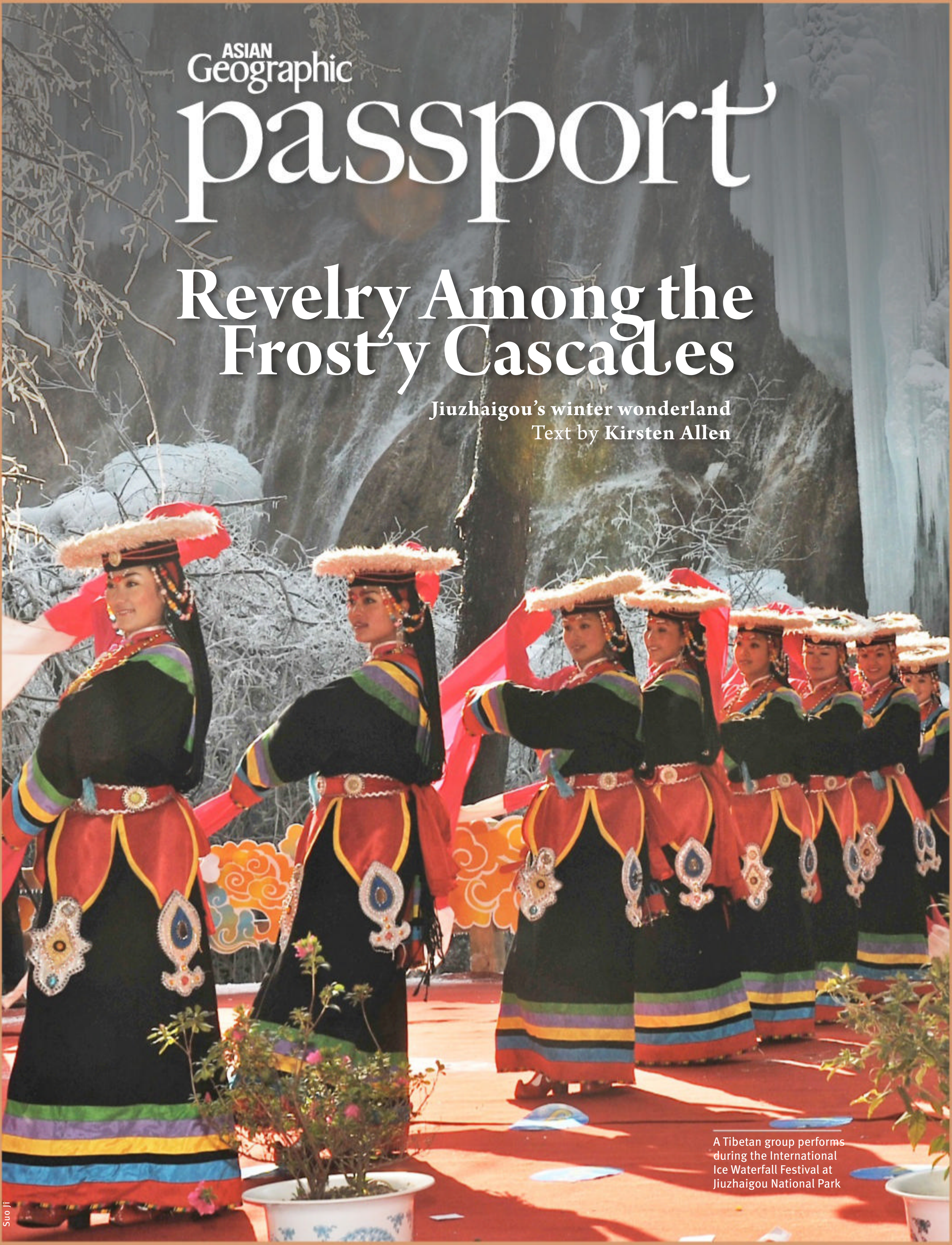


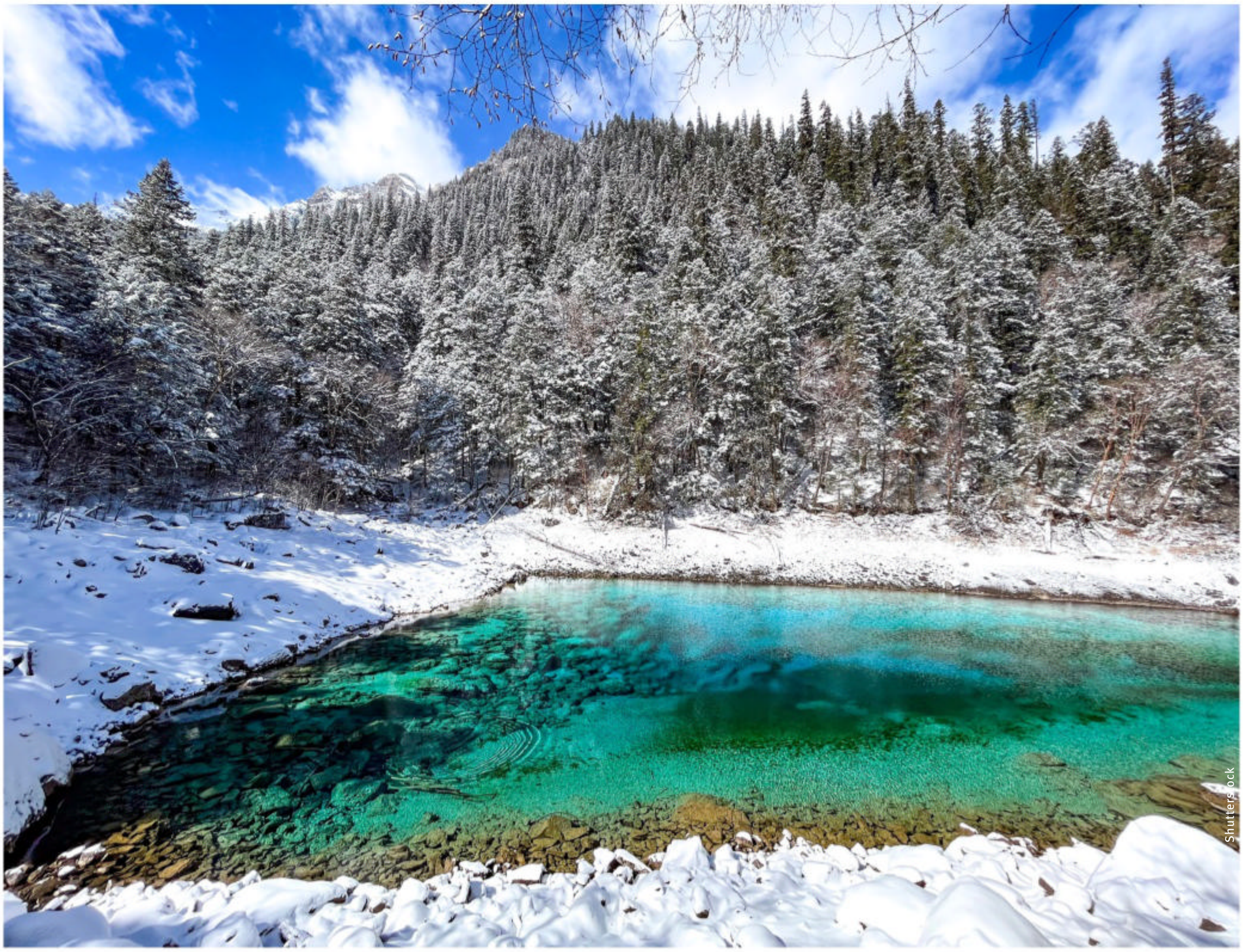
Revelry Among the Frosty Cascades

Jiuzhaigou's winter wonderland

Text by **Kirsten Allen**

A Tibetan group performs during the International Ice Waterfall Festival at Jiuzhaigou National Park

Suo Ji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▲
The beautiful Five Colour Lake, the smallest among Jiuzhaigou's lakes

►▲
Some of Jiuzhaigou's waterfalls are freezing but still flowing in winter

►
Chang Hai, or Long Lake, freezes to a depth of half a metre in winter

It's only in the depths of winter in China's Jiuzhaigou National Park that temperatures drop low enough to freeze the park's famous blue-green waters. When nighttime temperatures dip to minus 10 degrees Celsius and a sunny day hovers around 3 degrees Celsius, Jiuzhaigou's fast-flowing waterfalls are turned into hidden springs behind white and blue icicles and ice sheets cascading down rock faces that separate the park's many lakes. It is a stark winter landscape that is about colour and frozen motion.

It's not just the waterfalls that attract attention; the lakes, which are a bright blue or green due to mineral deposits, appear even more vibrantly coloured when surrounded by snow and bare trees. One of China's best kept secrets – until now – has been that winter is the best time to visit Jiuzhaigou because the full leaf of summer and stunning red and orange autumn foliage aren't there to obscure the views of the 114 lakes, the five large waterfalls and the many streams.

The largest lake in the park is Chang Hai, or Long Lake. At an altitude of 3,100 metres, Chang Hai is also the park's highest lake. During the winter months, it freezes completely, turning the upper reaches of the park into what looks like a solid white bowl.

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Lunita S V Mendoza

Lunita S V Mendoza

◂▴
For many, Jiuzhaigou is at its most beautiful in winter

▴
Local Tibetans with prayer wheels make their way to the waterfall

◂
Dressed for the occasion, Tibetan children come in their festival best

This stunning winter landscape has proven so inspiring that the park began hosting an annual festival in its honour. The weeklong International Ice Waterfall Festival focuses on showing visitors Jiuzhaigou's most scenic winter spots.

The event begins at the start of the Pearl Shoals Waterfall path, offering scenes of a towering, snow dusted mountain, tall pines and an icy river. Locals from the villages within the park and those from neighbouring valleys with their brightly coloured coats and scarves mingle with tourists on a scenic and refreshing descent into the valley to the waterfall.

Vying for the best spot to have their picture taken with the mountains behind them, voices call out in the local Tibetan dialect, Chinese, English, Korean and Japanese, accompanied by fingers pointing at the water flowing through trees and grasses. At the base of the falls, a handful of small blue, green, pink, yellow and white paper prayer flags are given out to throw.

DID YOU KNOW?

Jiuzhaigou was discovered by government officials on a logging expedition in the 1970s. The blue-green waters, orchids and abundant wildlife were like nothing they had seen elsewhere in southwest China, so they decided to preserve the area and create China's first national park. The park was later given UNESCO status in 1992.

Lunita S V Mendoza

Suo Ji

◄ ◄▼
Dancers at the frozen
Pearl Shoals Waterfall

◄◄
Park officials
conduct the festival's
opening ceremony

Suo Ji

A more accessible and dramatic background for an opening ceremony would be hard to find. The park officials stand on a stage in front of the plunging Pearl Shoals Waterfall. This thunderous wall of water moves too quickly to freeze entirely. Yet the mist from the falls lightly dusts nearby trees, turning them into a naturally glittering backdrop for the stage.

Once speeches are done, and the orchestra starts playing, thousands of small paper flags are thrown into the air – the good wishes of festival-goers taken to the gods by the wind – while local men and women spin their prayer wheels, whispering their hopes for a prosperous winter. Local dancers then take to the stage, their elaborate costumes sparkling from the mist of the falls.

Festivities continue with trips to the park's eco-tourism camping site in Zha Ru Valley and to nearby Zhong Cha Valley, where visitors are shown replicas of local homes that can be rented out. Each new place would welcome visitors with dragon dances, tea and a story about their lives in the place they call "a fairyland on Earth." ◆ AG

The wind brings the wishes of the prayer flags to the gods

Suo Ji

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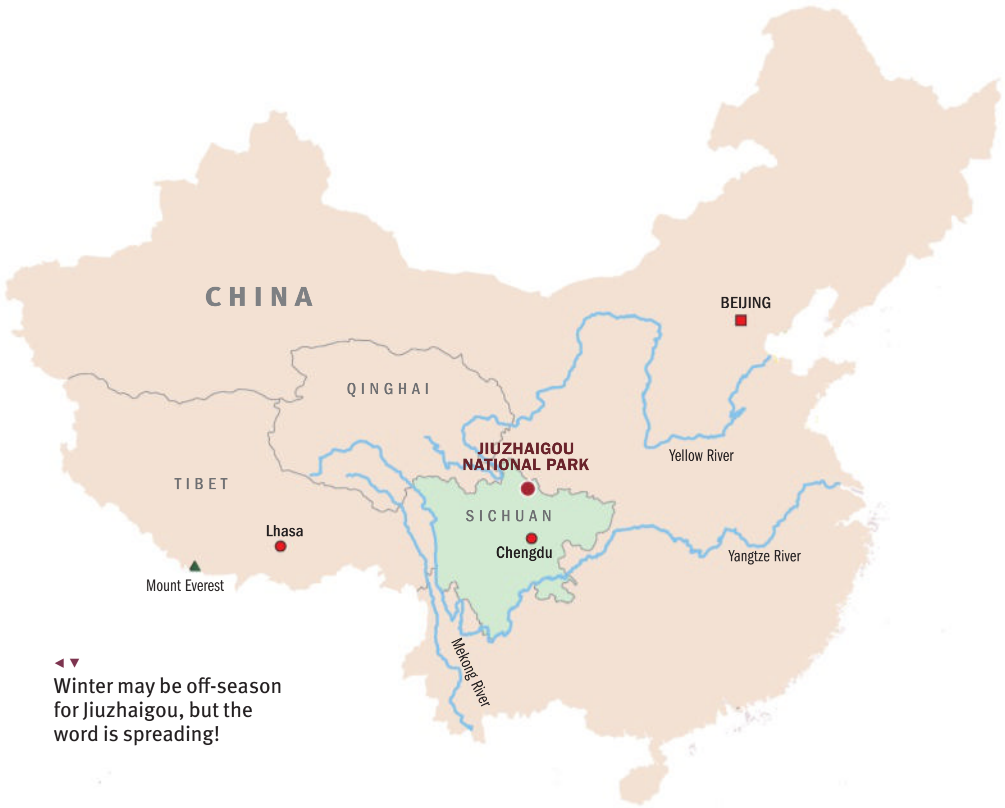

◂◂
An elderly local woman wraps up warm against Jiuzhaigou's chilly wind

◂
Tibetan women in embroidered ethnic clothing at Jiuzhaigou

◂▾
Winter may be off-season for Jiuzhaigou, but the word is spreading!

Ethnic Jiuzhaigou

Locals are known as Amdo Tibetans, which are not to be confused with modern-day Tibetans living on the Tibetan Plateau. Amdo Tibetans have been living in the area now known as Jiuzhaigou since marching through it on a military campaign, and subsequently settling there, some 3,000 years ago. Many of their stories involve what is now the national park.

As local legend has it, a young man named Dage fell in love with the goddess Woluo Semo. He wanted to give her a present worthy of her beauty and so he harnessed the wind to make her a mirror. But the evil spirits intervened and the goddess shattered the mirror. Where the pieces touched the Earth, they formed the lakes and rivers in Jiuzhaigou.

But the story doesn't end there. Some time later, a monkey who was travelling from the Tibetan Plateau on a rhinoceros fell ill. He stopped at a lake just below the Pearl Shoals Waterfall to rest and to get some water. Upon drinking the water he was healed. To show his thanks, he left his rhinoceros in the lake to protect it and the people who relied upon it.

The locals have many more stories about the healing properties of Jiuzhaigou's waters and the ways it has influenced their lives through the centuries. The park's festival is one way of sharing their history with visitors – traditional costumes appear, prayer wheels spin and stories get told to anyone who stops and asks.

EXPEDITION INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

Jiuzhaigou is about an hour from Chengdu, Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. Air China, China Eastern Airlines, China Southern Airlines, Hainan Airlines, and Sichuan Airlines all fly to Jiuzhaigou from various Chinese cities.

WHEN TO GO

Winter is the off-season for Jiuzhaigou, and mid-November to end-March, entrance tickets cost less than half the price during the peak season.

ACCOMMODATION

Several international hotels can be found near the park, such as Hilton Jiuzhaigou Resort (*www.hilton.com*) and InterContinental Resort Jiuzhai Paradise (*www.ihg.com/intercontinental*), but for all-out luxury, there's Rissai Valley, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve (*www.ritzcarlton.com*), which offers stunning views of the Minshan mountains.

INFORMATION

https://en.jiuzhai.com

Time zone
+8
UTC+08:00

Capital
Beijing

Language
Mandarin Chinese

Currency
Chinese renminbi (YUAN)

Calling code
+86

Electricity
220V

Plug type
A, C (European-style)

Kep Archipelago Hope Spot Team Wins Landmark Contract to Restore Cambodia’s Coastline

With support from Rolex Perpetual Planet Initiative partner Mission Blue, a local conservation organisation is working tirelessly to bring the ocean’s largest vegetarian mammal, the dugong, back to restored seagrass meadows in Cambodian waters.

According to Mission Blue Hope Spot Champion Rachana Thap, seagrass is “the superhero in the oceans”. Not only does it form the basis of ecosystems that are critical to hundreds of marine species, it is also capable of sequestering more carbon than any terrestrial forest.

The waters of the Kep Archipelago were once rich with seagrass and teeming with life, but years of industrial fishing and bottom trawling wiped away huge swaths of seagrass and coral reef.

The story might have ended there, but not for a former policeman from England, Paul Ferber, who arrived in Cambodia in 2006 to teach diving. Struck by the need to conserve the beautiful waters, he founded Marine Conservation Cambodia (MCC) in 2008.

In 2013, after years of championing the marine environment, MCC was invited by the Cambodian government to form a permanent base on the island of Koh Ach Seh in the Kep Archipelago, where they were joined by Thap, a university student at the time, on a six-month internship. She was working on a marine biology thesis on artificial reefs and was soon appointed by Ferber to lead a project implementing these reefs in the archipelago.

The artificial reefs are structures made up of two-tonne concrete blocks that act as both an anti-trawling measure and provide a habitat to replenish the marine ecosystem. As the artificial reefs took effect, all manner of wildlife began to return to the region, including Irrawaddy dolphins and green turtles.

Marine Conservation Cambodia were invited by the Cambodian government to make a permanent base on the island of Koh Ach Seh. From there, they work around the clock, studying and protecting the surrounding marine life. In 2018 the area around the island was given official government protection as a Marine Fisheries Management Area © Rolex/Camilo Diaz

"It's going to change the whole Cambodian coastal province. The potential for restoration and returning wildlife is enormous."

– Marine Conservation Cambodia Executive Director Rachana Thap

Seeing Kep's marine life flourish, the people of the neighbouring Kampot Province asked MCC to install reef structures along their coast, "and they say the number of dolphins increased immediately after deployment," says Thap. Ferber was so impressed with the project's success, he appointed Thap to be his successor, as Executive Director of MCC.

Recognising the success of MCC's work, in 2016 the Cambodian government declared the country's second Marine Fisheries Management Area: 11,600 hectares of ocean around the Kep Archipelago, including 12 islands, dedicated to sustainable fishing practices and improving local livelihoods.

With life thriving amid the artificial reefs, Thap began to wonder if it might be possible to bring back the dugong, which had not been seen in Cambodia's waters for many years. She reached out to Mission Blue, an ocean conservation non-profit organisation supported by the Rolex Perpetual Planet Initiative and started by legendary marine biologist Sylvia Earle, to help extend and amplify the project's success.

In 2019, Mission Blue named the Kep Archipelago a Hope Spot. "Being recognised by Mission Blue was a really big moment," says Thap. "It's hugely encouraging for us to know that we're not working alone; we have international backup."

Thap was able to expand the distribution of artificial reefs, which now number over 300. In just a few years, 1,000 hectares of seagrass returned to the archipelago, and in 2022, this yielded an extraordinary result: a dugong and its calf spotted in the waters of the archipelago. "It just appeared 300 metres from our island," recalls Thap. "It almost made me cry. We spent hours watching it. I can't describe the feeling, but it showed us that what we were doing was right." Since then, dugong sightings in the recovering seagrass meadows have become a regular occurrence.

The Rolex Perpetual Planet Initiative and Mission Blue both believe in the power of engaging local people in conservation, which is a large part of why

Marine Conservation Cambodia Executive Director Rachana Thap, Community Chief Uk Sovannarith and boat captain Pu Jorch, filling out a sighting calendar to track the marine mammals they encountered in Preak Tnot waters, Kampot Province, Cambodia © Rolex/Camilo Diaz

The Marine Conservation Cambodia team use a drone to survey the waters of the Kep Archipelago from above, which helps them to locate and monitor seagrass meadows © Rolex/Camilo Diaz

Kep Archipelago is such an exemplary and successful Hope Spot. By collaborating with the local community, MCC are ensuring conservation work helps sustain local livelihoods. "We work with the community because this is their home," says Thap. Locals have been delighted to see an increase in their catches in areas where the ecosystem has been recovering thanks to MCC's protection: "The local community love the artificial reefs and have requested us to install more."

Installing more artificial reefs is exactly what Thap plans to do, having recently been contracted by the Cambodian government to install 5,000 of the structures along the Cambodian coast over the next five-and-a-half years. "It's going to change the whole Cambodian coastal province," she says. "The potential for restoration and returning wildlife is enormous."

Although she has been with MCC for seven years, Thap feels that her work is just beginning: "For me, it's not about five or 10 years; it is a lifetime commitment." With the support and media visibility offered by Rolex and Mission Blue, she is spreading awareness of her work and its implications not just for the archipelago, or even Cambodia, but the wider world: "This is not just a national project; it is a worldwide one."

For more information, visit *www.rolex.org*

Marine Conservation Cambodia run a programme along the coast, helping local people to move into more sustainable oyster farming by deploying bamboo shellfish rafts © Rolex/Camilo Diaz

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ON THE COVER:

A performer enthralls audiences with traditional face-changing art, or *bian lian*, at the Chunxifang Chunxilu covered street in Chengdu, China

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